

The Best of Hugo Award Nominee

ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

1988 Annual Anthology / \$4.50

Stories by:

Orson Scott Card

Frederik Pohl

Ian Watson

and 9 others ...



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EDITOR'S NOTES

By Charles C. Ryan

The Hugo Nomination

As I was in the process of writing this introduction — the last thing to be done for the anthology — I received a telephone call from a representative of NolaCon II, the 1988 World Science Fiction Convention. It seems *ABO* (which is what we affectionately call *Aboriginal Science Fiction*) had been nominated for a Hugo Award.

The Hugo, named after Hugo Gernsback and voted by fans attending or supporting the WorldCon, is science fiction's equivalent of an Academy Award.

It's terrific to be nominated for a Hugo in the small-press ("semiprozine") category. The nomination was for 1987, our first full year of publication.

The other four nominees in this category are *Interzone*, a British magazine of speculative fiction; *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle*, both trade news magazines; and *Thrust*, a critical review magazine. *Locus* has won the award for the last 10,000 years or so, much to Andrew Porter's distress. Andy edits *Science Fiction Chronicle*, a direct, but smaller, competitor of *Locus*.

All the nominees in this category are professional publications. All of them have paid circulations under 10,000. None is "semi-pro" in the normal sense of the word. (The funny thing is that even though there is an award for small-press magazines, there is no category for larger magazines, called "prozines." Prozines are SF magazines with paid circulations over 10,000. The closest is the category of Best Editor, which lump book, anthology and magazine editors together.)

It was also nice to learn that Bob Eggleton, one of our regular illustrators, has been nominated for a Hugo for Best Artist. Other *ABO* contributors nominated for awards include Orson Scott Card, who appeared in *ABO* #1, for the novel *Seventh Son* and the novella "Eye for Eye," and Martha Soukup, who appeared in *ABO* #7, for the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer.

A milestone

This anthology marks several milestones for the magazine. First and foremost, it means *ABO* has survived — a major accomplishment in the magazine industry.

It also means that we are just about out of back issues of the magazine, so we have, retroactively, accomplished one of our goals — selling more than 10,000 copies of each issue.

Since the full run of back issues won't be available much longer, we felt those who join us in midstream, so to speak, might like to get a peek at our origins.

This collection, then, represents some of the best stories we published in our formative years, 1986 and 1987. Needless to say, we think all of the stories, poems and illustrations we published deserve to be reprinted, but we had a limited amount of space and had to pick just a few. If we've done our job, you'll find stories in here which will make you glad and mad, happy and sad. You'll be entertained. And maybe the stories will ignite a thought or two about the future. That's what science fiction is all about.

The cover for the anthology, done by Carl Lundgren, has already won an award. It was picked as the best science fiction illustration at the 1986 WorldCon. We had commissioned it for a story which appeared in our second issue, but somehow, either in the separations or in the printing, it lost the sharp contrasts that should be visible now. Even though we didn't have space to reprint the story, we felt Carl's cover art deserved another shot at being printed properly.

Our history

ABO began as an 11- by 17-inch full-color tabloid. We chose a tabloid for several reasons. From the beginning we wanted to emphasize science fiction art nearly as much as science fiction. The way to do that, we decided, was to publish the art in full color, not just on the cover, but inside as well.

We actually had wanted to begin where the magazine is now — as a full-color, full-slick. But that was too expensive. *ABO* also began as a bootstrap operation — meaning we didn't have much money. This wasn't Time Inc. launching a new magazine, it was me, and my wallet is pretty thin.

We introduced the first issue of *ABO* (October 1986) at the World Science Fiction Convention in Atlanta on Labor Day weekend. We had fairly decent sales, but for the most part no one seemed to know what to make of it. It looked a little like a newspaper, but was printed on a good 50-pound offset stock (better paper than that used by any of the prozine digests). It also had color art and short stories. We called it a magazine, but people were scratching their heads — it didn't fit their preconceptions for a magazine, which for most had to be a digest or 8½- by 11-inch publication.

Those who took the time to read *ABO* generally liked it. We got letters and began to grow. We also met increasing resistance from book stores that hadn't the faintest idea how to display a tabloid magazine. Most wanted it folded in half so it would fit in their display racks (and obscure the art). Others refused to take it. Few bothered to read it to see if it was any good. It was mostly a reaction to the form. By the third issue we had gotten the message. Everyone who liked art also liked the way we were able to display it. But few, from collectors to bookstores, knew how to cope with a tabloid.

We switched to a more traditional magazine format, but refused to drop to a digest size — which is the format for all of the other science fiction prozines. We still wanted to provide a forum for reproducing good illustrations. But we weren't in a position yet to afford a slick cover.

We kept growing. More and more people who read *ABO* liked it. We began getting unsolicited renewals. Some even sent renewals for 36 issues.

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Sing

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch Art by Bob Eggleton

When I was a little girl, there was this guy who lived down the road. He was big, but he weren't mean. I don't think he ever hurt nobody before I first met him.

He called himself Dirk and the name fit 'cause he looked like the daggers children use. He was long and thin, with only two arms and two legs. But he was strong, and he moved like he owned the world — or at least a small part of it.

I used to walk past his place a lot. It was the strangest place I ever seen, all shiny and silver, but the lawn was real nice. He kept the flowers well-cropped. Sometimes these strange sounds echoed around the silver and kept me away. But most of the time, he'd sit right outside his door and blow air through a hollow tube. It made the most awful noise I ever heard, but he seemed to like it.

One day he called me over, sat me down and showed me his tube. It had a bunch of little holes punched in it. I thought maybe he wanted me to take it back to my dad 'cause my dad was good at fixing all kinds of things, but Dirk said no, he had something else to ask me.

— Would you, he asked like he was scared I'd say no even before I heard the question, would you teach me how to sing?

Well, I'd never heard the word "sing" before and I told him so. He kinda frowned and said it was the only word he couldn't find a translation for. That word and a couple others he called "related," as if words could share blood like people do.

— I can't teach something that I don't know what it is, I said to him and he started laughing then.

— Child, you sing all the time, when you're walking, when you're eating, even when you're laughing. You people make the most beautiful music — (one of his related words) — in the entire galaxy. So I came here to learn how to do it.

I told him I sure didn't know what "it" was and I got to thinking that maybe he was a little crazy somehow. Not scary-crazy like some folks can be, but just plain nutty. Wacky enough to make most people uncomfortable.

— Look, sweetheart, he said, back where I come from, I'm one of the most famous musicians in the world. But I can't do half of what you people do. You make the experience of two millennia sound like the tinkering of children. I

want to use your songs the way Copeland and Sibelius used folk tunes. But first I gotta know how you sing.

— You're not helping me, I said. If this sing is something I do all the time like breathing or blinking, how come I don't know about it?

— That's the big question. None of you people seems to know what you're doing. It's driving me nuts. Everybody has their own personal melody which they play every day with a different variation. It's like gypsy music, never the same. And I'm the only one who can hear it.

I got a little scared there when he said he was going nuts. You never know what someone named Dirk would do when he went crazy. So I picked myself up off the flowers and moved away a little, telling him I had to go somewhere when I really didn't.

He said that was okay, I should come back when I didn't have anything better to do.

I went home then and told my dad about the awful broken tube and he said that maybe I should stay away from Dirk 'cause Dirk weren't like other people. No matter what my dad said, I planned to go back 'cause I thought Dirk was pretty interesting even if he were strange. But I didn't get to go 'cause the next day was the day the first dead body turned up outside of Dirk's place.

It was the body of Rastee the sailor. Rastee had been the most romantic person in town. He sailed on air currents and sometimes, if he were feeling nice, he take a handful of us along. Ain't nothing so smooth and fine as gliding along with the breeze, letting the air dip in and out of your pores. But our chance to sail was gone with Rastee 'cause he was the only expert sailor our little town had.

He was lying in the lawn, crushing a nice poppy grouping that the people who lived there before made. The poppies had soaked into Rastee's skin, all the juices in his body had dried up and his wings had gone blue like he couldn't get no breath, but there weren't no broken bones or nothing so even though it looked like he crash-landed, most people was saying he didn't.

But we just picked him up and carried him off to the place of grass so he wouldn't decay and ruin any more flowers. And nobody said nothing to Dirk or to anyone else. We all went home and mourned the freezing of Rastee's soul.



Dirk was around, same as usual that day, and we was all surprised 'cause there ain't no such thing as a murder without a suicide. There's just so much passion and violence going on that the souls intertwine and when one soul freezes over the other turns to ice too. So we all knew that Dirk didn't kill Rastee and 'cause there weren't no other dead bodies around, the town elders went to the place of grass to study Rastee hoping he hadn't flown over another town and brought a plague back with him.

The elders hadn't figured anything out yet when another dead body turned up on Dirk's lawn in the same spot as Rastee. Nobody was too surprised when they found out it was Maggtana. She'd been poisoning herself for years, sprinkling dried parsnips over everything she ate. I admit, I tried parsnips once or twice, and the rush they give is mighty nice, but everybody knows those things are addicting and will kill you if you ain't careful. And everybody knew Maggtana weren't careful.

That was pretty much it until the night Dirk called me over from the side of the street.

You know, he said, I think I got it all figured out. Your ear can't hear certain *pitches*. That's why you walk around oblivious to the sounds you make.

Like usual, I didn't know what he was talking about so I just nodded and pretended I did.

— But I think I fixed it, he said real excited-like. I jury-rigged the playback on one of my recorders so that everything will be in your frequency. I can play your *song* for you if you like.

Well, I thought that sounded just fine. It'd been bugging me for days what them related words of his meant and I was pretty glad I was finally gonna find out.

He took me inside his place and it looked as strange as he did. There was wires and metal all over, and more hollow tubes — some made from wood — and hollow boxes with strings. He sat me down on this platform with four legs that he called a chair but it didn't look like no chair to me.

I felt kinda funny in there with all that strange stuff and so I asked him a question.

— You done this with anyone else?

— Sit them in here and make them listen? he asked back.

— I guess, I said, not knowing really what I meant at all.

— No. I put out a directional *mic* and recorded them while they were passing by. I didn't think of asking them in. I played the *songs* back on my outside speakers, but I don't think anyone heard.

He was talking kinda odd-like and I remembered him saying how things here was driving him nuts and I kinda got a little scared.

— Whatcha mean, recorded them? I asked and he didn't answer, just touched one of those pieces of metal with the wires all around it.

It made a funny little high noise and then I saw Rastee right in front of me, leaning against a metal thing and talking like he always did. Only I knew it weren't Rastee since he was dead. It had to be a frozen part of his soul. I ain't never

heard of nobody seeing a frozen soul before and I was afraid it might freeze me, so I screamed real loud. Dirk hit the piece of metal and Rastee went away.

— What's the matter? he asked.

— That was Rastee!

He smiled then and said, — Yes, Rastee's *song*. Isn't it lovely? It's one of the best. So free and happy.

— You got Maggtana too then.

— Her *song* has more melancholy in it than all the others. It tears my heart.

Then he sat in one of those odd chairs and looked right at me.

— But yours is the best. My very favorite. So light and innocent and warm. If you just sit a minute, I'll record it. It's sound-proof in here and I'll get even better quality on you than I did on the others.

— No. I got up out of the chair and ran for the door. — You're not gonna do nothing to me. You froze their souls and now they're dead and I don't want to die like that with clogged pores and no breath and no juices and a soul that can't change when I do.

He put his hand on the door and stood in my way. He looked real upset.

— I'll let you go, just tell me who died.

— Rastee and Maggtana. We found them out in your poppies.

— How come nobody told me?

— 'Cause, I said, we thought it didn't have nothing to do with you. Your soul was all right. Nobody murders and lives. Except you.

— But all I did was record them, he said. Recording doesn't hurt anyone.

I tried to inch around him real slow. — All I know is that Rastee's soul is froze and he's dead and you bring me in here and show me part of Rastee that don't exist no more.

Dirk was staring at his metal stuff. — We recorded hundreds of you off planet and nobody died, except....

He went over to one of the metal boxes and pulled papers out from beside it. I moved closer to the door. I didn't want to run in case he turned one of them boxes on me.

— Playback, he whispered. They died after playback. Oh my god.

He got out of my way. He stared at his metal stuff and water started running down his cheeks.

— Oh my god.

I opened the door and let myself out and went running to the town elders to tell them it weren't no plague at all but Dirk and his funny hollow tubes and we all decided that we'd have to make him leave, so we went back to his place in a big group, but he was gone. His place, his tubes, his metal. Everything was all gone. There was just a big flat spot in the flowers where his place used to be.

We searched all over for him, but we never did find him. And Rastee and Maggtana stayed just as dead as they were that morning in the poppies. But the rest of us was all right. And

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Prior Restraint

By Orson Scott Card

Art by Larry Blamire

I met Doc Murphy in a writing class taught by a mad Frenchman at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. I had just quit my job as a coat-and-tie editor at a conservative family magazine, and I was having a little trouble getting used to being a slob student again. Of a shaggy lot, Doc was the shaggiest and I was prepared to be annoyed by him and ignore his opinions. But his opinions were not to be ignored. At first because of what he did to me. And then, at last, because of what had been done to him. It has shaped me; his past looms over me whenever I sit down to write.

Armand the teacher, who had not improved on his French accent by replacing it with Bostonian, looked puzzled as he held up my story before the class. "This is commercially viable," he said. "It is also crap. What else can I say?"

It was Doc who said it. Nail in one hand, hammer in the other, he crucified me and the story. Considering that I had already decided not to pay attention to him, and considering how arrogant I was in the lofty position of being the one student who had actually sold a novel, it is surprising to me that I listened to him. But underneath the almost angry attack on my work was something else: a basic respect, I think, for what a good writer should be. And for that small hint in my work that a good writer might be hiding somewhere in me.

So I listened. And I learned. And gradually, as the Frenchman got crazier and crazier, I turned to Doc to learn how to write. Shaggy though he was, he had a far crisper mind than anyone I had ever known in a business suit.

We began to meet outside class. My wife had left me two years before, so I had plenty of free time and a pretty large rented house to sprawl in; we drank or read or talked, in front of a fire or over Doc's convincing veal parmesan or out chopping down an insidious vine that wanted to take over the world starting in my back yard. For the first time since Denae had gone I felt at home in my house—Doc seemed to know by instinct what parts of the house held the wrong memories, and he soon balanced them by making me feel comfortable in them again.

Or uncomfortable. Doc didn't always say nice things.

"I can see why your wife left you," he said

once.

"You don't think I'm good in bed, either?" (This was a joke — neither Doc nor I had any unusual sexual predilections.)

"You have a neanderthal way of dealing with people, that's all. If they aren't going where you want them to go, club 'em a good one and drag 'em away."

It was irritating. I didn't like thinking about my wife. We had only been married three years, and not good years either, but in my own way I had loved her and I missed her a great deal and I hadn't wanted her to go when she left. I didn't like having my nose rubbed in it. "I don't recall clubbing you."

He just smiled. And, of course, I immediately thought back over the conversation and realized that he was right. I hated his goddam smile.

"OK," I said, "you're the one with long hair in the land of the last surviving crew cuts. Tell me why you like 'Swap' Morris."

"I don't like Morris. I think Morris is a whore selling someone else's freedom to win votes."

And I was confused, then. I had been excoriating good old "Swap" Morris, Davis County Commissioner, for having fired the head librarian in the county because she had dared to stock a "pornographic" book despite his objections. Morris showed every sign of being illiterate, fascist, and extremely popular, and I would gladly have hit the horse at his lynching.

"So you don't like Morris either—what did I say wrong?"

"Censorship is never excusable for any reason, says you."

"You like censorship?"

And then the half-serious banter turned completely serious. Suddenly he wouldn't look at me. Suddenly he only had eyes for the fire, and I saw the flames dancing in tears resting on his lower eyelids, and I realized again that with Doc I was out of my depth completely.

"No," he said. "No, I don't like it."

And then a lot of silence until he finally drank two full glasses of wine, just like that, and went out to drive home; he lived up Emigration Canyon at the end of a winding, narrow road, and I was afraid he was too drunk, but he only said to me at the door, "I'm not drunk. It takes half a gallon of wine just to



get up to normal after an hour with you, you're so damn sober."

One weekend he even took me to work with him. Doc made his living in Nevada. We left Salt Lake City on Friday afternoon and drove to Wendover, the first town over the border. I expected him to be an employee of the casino we stopped at. But he didn't punch in, just left his name with a guy; and then he sat in a corner with me and waited.

"Don't you have to work?" I asked.

"I'm working," he said.

"I used to work just the same way, but I got fired."

"I've got to wait my turn for a table. I told you I made my living with poker."

And it finally dawned on me that he was a freelance professional — a player — a cardshark.

There were four guys named Doc there that night. Doc Murphy was the third one called to a table. He played quietly, and lost steadily but lightly for two hours. Then, suddenly, in four hands he

made back everything he had lost and added nearly fifteen hundred dollars to it. Then he made his apologies after a decent number of losing hands and we drove back to Salt Lake.

"Usually I have to play again on Saturday night," he told me. Then he grinned. "Tonight I was lucky. There was an idiot who thought he knew poker."

I remembered the old saw: Never eat at a place called Mom's, never play poker with a man named Doc, and never sleep with a woman who's got more troubles than you. Pure truth. Doc memorized the deck, knew all the odds by heart, and it was a rare poker face that Doc couldn't eventually see through.

At the end of the quarter, though, it finally dawned on me that in all the time we were in class together, I had never seen one of his own stories. He hadn't written a damn thing. And there was his grade on the bulletin board — A.

I talked to Armand.

"Oh, Doc writes," he assured me. "Better than

you do, and you got an A. God knows how, you don't have the talent for it."

"Why doesn't he turn it in for the rest of the class to read?"

Armand shrugged. "Why should he? Pearls before swine."

Still it irritated me. After watching Doc disembowel more than one writer, I didn't think it was fair that his own work was never put on the chopping block.

The next quarter he turned up in a graduate seminar with me, and I asked him. He laughed and told me to forget it. I laughed back and told him I wouldn't. I wanted to read his stuff. So the next week he gave me a three-page manuscript. It was an unfinished fragment of a story about a man who honestly thought his wife had left him even though he went home to find her there every night. It was some of the best writing I've ever read in my life. No matter how you measure it. The stuff was clear enough and exciting enough that any moron who likes Harold Robbins could have enjoyed it. But the style was rich enough and the matter of it deep enough even in a few pages that it made most other "great" writers look like chicken farmers. I reread the fragment five times just to make sure I got it all. The first time I had thought it was metaphorically about me. The third time I knew it was about God. The fifth time I knew it was about everything that mattered, and I wanted to read more.

"Where's the rest?" I asked. He shrugged. "That's it," he said.

"It doesn't feel finished."

"It isn't."

"Well, finish it! Doc, you could sell this anywhere, even the *New Yorker*. For them you probably don't even have to finish it."

"Even the *New Yorker*. Golly."

"I can't believe you think you're too good for anybody, Doc. Finish it. I want to know how it ends."

He shook his head. "That's all there is. That's all there ever will be."

And that was the end of the discussion.

But from time to time he'd show me another fragment. Always better than the one before. And in the meantime we became closer, not because he was such a good writer — I'm not so self-effacing I like hanging around with people who can write me under the table — but because he was Doc Murphy. We found every decent place to get a beer in Salt Lake City — not a particularly time-consuming activity. We saw three good movies and another dozen that were so bad they were fun to watch. He taught me to play poker well enough that I broke even every weekend. He put up with my succession of girlfriends and prophesied that I would probably end up married again. "You're just weak willed enough to try to make a go of it," he cheerfully told me.

At last, when I had long since given up asking, he told me why he never finished anything.

I was two and a half beers down, and he was

drinking a hideous mix of Tab and tomato juice that he drank whenever he wanted to punish himself for his sins, on the theory that it was even worse than the Hindu practice of drinking your own piss. I had just got a story back from a magazine I had been sure would buy it. I was thinking of giving it up. He laughed at me.

"I'm serious," I said.

"Nobody who's any good at all needs to give up writing."

"Look who's talking. The king of the determined writers." He looked angry. "You're a paraplegic making fun of a one-legged man," he said.

"I'm sick of it."

"Quit then. Makes no difference. Leave the field to the hacks. You're probably a hack, too."

Doc hadn't been drinking anything to make him surly, not drunk-surly, anyway. "Hey, Doc, I'm asking for encouragement."

"If you need encouragement, you don't deserve it. There's only one way a good writer can be stopped."

"Don't tell me you have a selective writer's block. Against endings."

"Writer's block? Jesus, I've never been blocked in my life. Blocks are what happen when you're not good enough to write the thing you know you have to write."

I was getting angry. "And you, of course, are always good enough."

He leaned forward, looked at me in the eyes. "I'm the best writer in the English language."

"I'll give you this much. You're the best who never finished anything."

"I finish everything," he said. "I finish everything, beloved friend, and then I burn all but the first three pages. I finish a story a week, sometimes. I've written three complete novels, four plays. I even did a screenplay. It would've made millions of dollars and been a classic."

"Says who?"

"Says—never mind who says. It was bought, it was cast, it was ready for filming. It had a budget of thirty million. The studio believed in it. Only intelligent thing I've ever heard of them doing."

I couldn't believe it. "You're joking."

"If I'm joking, who's laughing? It's true."

I'd never seen him looked so poisoned, so pained. It was true, if I knew Doc Murphy, and I think I did. "Why?" I asked.

"The Censorship Board."

"What? There's no such thing in America."

He laughed. "Not full-time anyway."

"Who the hell is the Censorship Board?"

He told me:

When I was twenty-two I lived on a rural road in Oregon, he said, outside of Portland. Mailboxes out on the road. I was writing, I was a playwright, I thought there'd be a career in that; I was just starting to try fiction. I went out one morning after the mailman had gone by. It was drizzling slightly. But I didn't much care. There was an envelope there from my Hollywood agent. It was a contract. Not an

option—a sale. A hundred thousand dollars. It had just occurred to me that I was getting wet and I ought to go in when two men came out of the bushes—yeah, I know, I guess they go for dramatic entrances. They were in business suits. God, I hate men who wear business suits. The one guy just held out his hand. He said, "Give it to me now and save yourself a lot of trouble." Give it to him? I told him what I thought of his suggestion. They looked like the mafia, or like a comic parody of the mafia, actually.

They were about the same height, and they seemed almost to be the same person, right down to a duplicate glint of fierceness in the eyes; but then I realized that my first impression had been deceptive. One was blond, one dark-haired; the blond had a slightly receding chin that gave his face a meek look from the nose down; the dark one had once had a bad skin problem and his neck was treeish, giving him an air of stupidity, as if a face had been pasted on the front of the neck with no room for a head at all. Not mafia at all. Ordinary people.

Except the eyes. That glint in the eyes was not false, and that was what had made me see them wrong at first. Those eyes had seen people weep, and had cared, and had hurt them again anyway. It's a look that human eyes should never have.

"It's just the *contract*, for Christ's sake," I told them, but the dark one with acne scars only told me again to hand it over.

By now, though, my first fear had passed; they weren't armed, and so I might be able to get rid of them without violence. I started back to the house. They followed me.

"What do you want my contract for?" I asked.

"That film will never be made," says Meech, the blond one with the missing chin. "We won't allow it to be made."

I'm thinking who writes their dialogue for them, do they crib it from Fenimore Cooper? "Their hundred thousand dollars says they want to try. I want them to."

"You'll never get the money, Murphy. And this contract and that screenplay will pass out of existence within the next four days. I promise you that."

I ask him, "What are you, a critic?"

"Close enough."

By now I was inside the door and they were on the other side of the threshold. I should have closed the door, probably, but I'm a gambler. I had to stay in this time because I had to know what kind of hand they had. "Plan to take it by force?" I asked.

"By inevitability," Tree says. And then he says, "You see, Mr. Murphy, you're a dangerous man; with your IBM Self-Correcting Selectric II typewriter that has a sluggish return so that you sometimes get letters printed a few spaces in from the end. With your father who once said to you, 'Billy, to tell you the honest-to-God truth, I don't know if I'm your father or not. I wasn't the only guy your Mom had been seeing when I married her, so I really don't give a damn if you live or die.'"

He had it right down. *Word for word*, what my father told me when I was four years old. I'd never told anybody. And he had it word for word.

CIA, Jesus. That's pathetic.

No, they weren't CIA. They just wanted to make sure that I didn't write. Or rather, that I didn't publish.

I told them I wasn't interested in their suggestions. And I was right—they weren't muscle types. I closed the door and they just went away.

And then the next day as I was driving my old Galaxy along the road, under the speed limit, a boy on a bicycle came right out in front of me. I didn't even have a chance to brake. One second he wasn't there, and the next second he was. I hit him. The bicycle went under the car, but he mostly came up the top. His foot stuck in the bumper, jammed in by the bike. The rest of him slid up over the hood, pulling his hip apart and separating his spine in three places. The hood ornament disemboweled him and the blood flowed up the windshield like a heavy rainstorm, so that I couldn't see anything except his face, which was pressed up against the glass with the eyes open. He died on the spot, of course. And I wanted to.

He had been playing Martians or something with his brother. The brother was standing there near the road with a plastic ray gun in his hand and a stupid look on his face. His mother came out of the house screaming. I was screaming, too. There were two neighbors who saw the whole thing. One of them called the cops and ambulance. The other one tried to control the mother and keep her from killing me. I don't remember where I was going. All I remember is that the car had taken an unusually long time starting that morning. Another minute and a half, I think—a long time, to start a car. If it had started up just like usual, I wouldn't have hit the kid. I kept thinking that—it was all just a coincidence that I happened to be coming by just at that moment. A half-second sooner and he would have seen me and swerved. A half-second later and I would have seen him. Just coincidence. The only reason the boy's father didn't kill me when he came home ten minutes later was because I was crying so damn hard. It never went to court because the neighbors testified that I hadn't a chance to stop, and the police investigator determined that I hadn't been speeding. Not even negligence. Just terrible, terrible chance.

I read the article in the paper. The boy was only nine, but he was taking special classes at school and was very bright, a good kid, ran a paper route and always took care of his brothers and sisters. A real tear-jerker for the consumption of the subscribers. I thought of killing myself. And then the men in the business suits came back. They had four copies of my script, my screenplay. Four copies is all I had ever made—the original was in my file.

"You see, Mr. Murphy, we have every copy of

(Continued to page 78)

Search and Destroy

By Frederik Pohl

Art by Val Lakey Lindahn

Assault Team Bravo moved up to the jump-off position in daylight, but then they had two hours to kill. Clouds were gathering, but the sun peeped out from under them just as it was setting, like a red seal pasted against the horizon's strip of sky.

Some of the nine men slept. They'd humped their blankets this far, they certainly wouldn't get any use out of them once the assault began, they figured they might as well use them now. Not Gamble. They were all tired. They'd marched the last two miles, because you couldn't risk using powered vehicles so close to the farm colony they were after. Gamble was probably the tiredest of the team, because he'd been the one stuck with unrolling the ball-breaking reel of fiber-optics cable, because you couldn't risk radio, either, and for the same reason. Still, Gamble didn't want to sleep. He sat watching the sun set, and for variety watching MacReady's screen to see if anything showed up yet, seismics or infrared. Nothing did, but then at this extreme range it was very unlikely anything would. Gamble wasn't terribly interested, one way or another. He wasn't particularly scared, either; he'd seen buddies get it, and he'd seen the whole team pull through without a scratch. If he thought about anything he thought to wonder about whether the other teams up and down the line would do their job, and whether MacReady, who was a brand-new replacement, really knew what he was doing with his instruments and detectors, but mostly he just sat. As soon as it was dark enough to move Halversen went through the team, passing out joints and kicking at the sleeping bags. "Light up, people," he whispered. "We move out in ten."

Little Mikros jerked awake and straight upright before he remembered where he was. "Oh, crap," he said, getting it all into focus. "Hey! Anything happening with the creeps?"

"They're just waiting for us," said Halversen, "and keep your effing voice down."

Mikros wasn't the only one blinking and looking stupid. That was one of the reasons Gamble didn't sleep before an action. He didn't really want the dope, either, but Halversen was watching him. Gamble lit up and took a deep drag. The warm, grassy smoke filled his lungs and scratched his throat, but it felt

good. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea after all, because if you were going to get some creep's bullet in you, it was probably better to get it stoned.

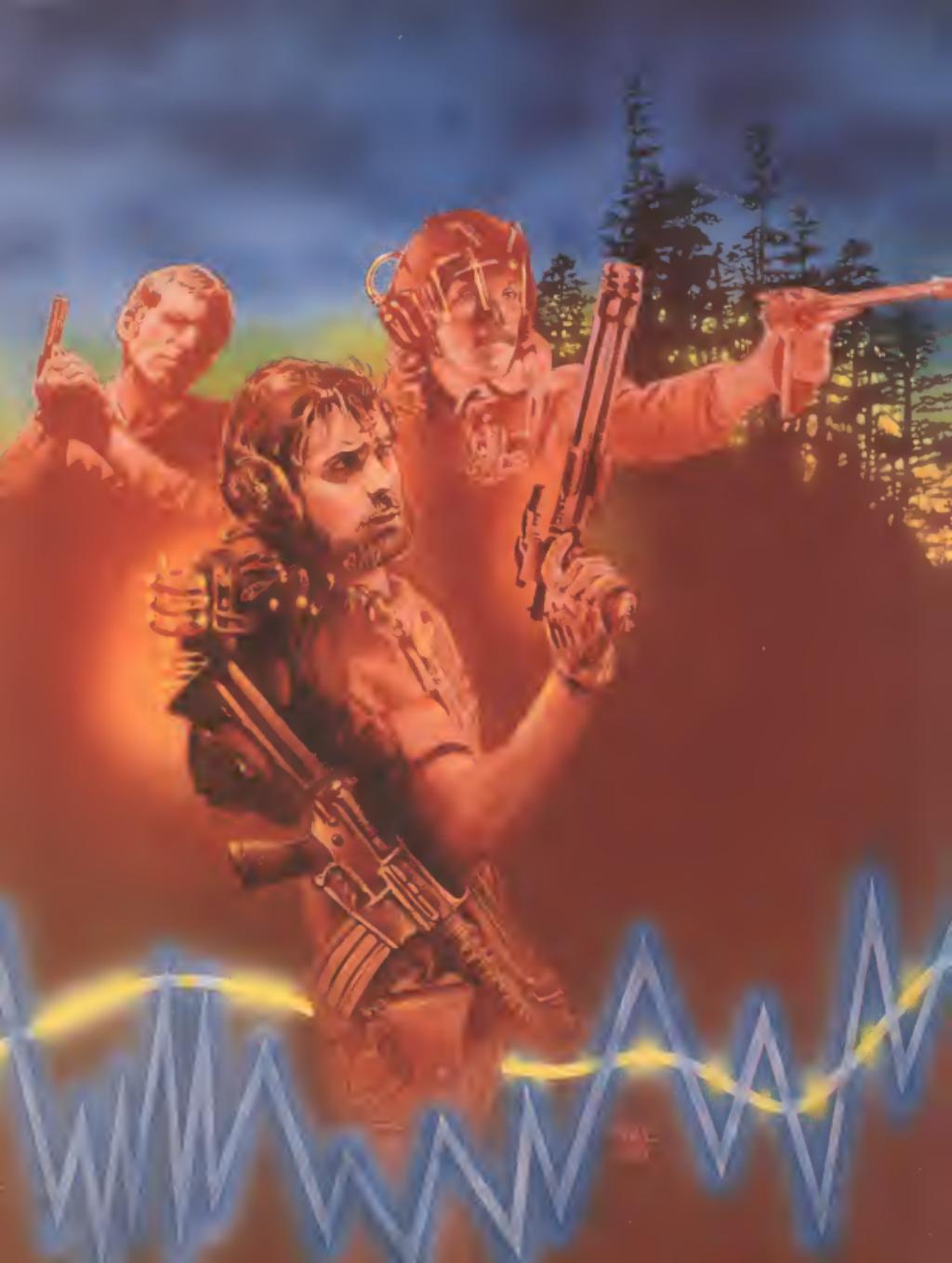
The new dork, MacReady, was buzzing around Halversen with more questions. "Is it going to rain? Are the other teams in place? Should we take the sleeping bags?"

Halversen was patient with him, for Halversen. "Shut your effing mouth," he whispered, and then relented enough to add, gathering the whole team close enough to hear, "Satellite reconnaissance says nobody's moving up there, so let's just keep it down and maybe we'll be all right. And, yeah, they say the rain'll start in the next half hour. Go!"

He thumbed Gamble to cap off the fiber-optics while the rest of the team was grunting its various items of equipment onto its shoulders. They'd be proceeding without contact until the firefight began, at least. And Assault Team Bravo moved off through the lightless woods.

For two hundred yards they marched in column, route step, silent. Then the woods thickened and Halversen waved them into open ranks with his gloves. There wasn't enough light to see anybody, but the luminous palms of the gauntlets were just will-o-the-wispy light enough to be visible to the men. Gamble moved up first, a dozen yards, then paused to listen and look. It wasn't likely to help. Human ears and human eyes weren't much good compared to Mikros's headphones and Halversen's night goggles, but there was always the chance he might catch something they missed. Ears and eyes were all he had — ears and eyes and firepower, sure, but what was the use of eighteen hundred rounds a minute if you didn't know where to point your piece?

Nobody really stopped when you were moving up this way. Gamble hardly got set before he saw the other members of the team slip noiselessly past him, nothing but the tiny phosphorescent glow at the back of the helmets to tell him that this was Mikros, humping his shoulder pack with the amplifier and sweeping the woods ahead with his parabolic mike; then Corfield and Turtlemann, Corfield with his grenade-bus launcher and Turtlemann sweating with the buses and the grenades; then MacReady with the seek-and-find



IR and seismic gear. MacReady wasn't silent, though. Twice in that first half mile Gamble heard MacReady before he saw him, stomp of off-balance boots when he tripped over a bush, mutter of Shit! when he pushed a branch aside and it slapped back in his face. One dip-shit like MacReady could really spoil your day. Gamble hoped he'd learned more about using his detection gear than he had about silent advance on an enemy position. The creeps ahead weren't playing games. They were just a bunch of farmers, sure, but they'd had a lot of practice in fighting for their farms. And they had as much gear as the assault team, pretty nearly. There was no doubt in Gamble's mind that somewhere not very far ahead, on top of the farmhouse maybe, maybe in a tree, there was a microphone six times the size of Mikros's that was nodding back and forth twenty-four hours a day, listening for somebody just like MacReady.

They told you when you signed up for search-and-destroy missions that it was a place where your ass was on the line. Then they told you how important it was to the U. S. of A., and then they told you all about the combat bonuses you got. They didn't lie. You got the bonus, all right, but when you were out in the field you knew for sure it really wasn't enough.

*** * ***

Doris was always saying that. She would be sweet as any woman knew how to be when he was home on leave, make him happy, make him know he was loved, and then when it was time to go back she'd cling to him and cry. And they'd play out the old refrains:

"This one's going to be easy, they told me already."

"They're never easy! People get killed!"

"Well, sure, honey, but — well, what about when we start a family? We'll need the money."

"What I need is a live husband." And then if her old man had come with her to the bus stop he'd chime in to cheer her up:

"Hell, Doris, this is nothing. Why, when we were in the Ardennes —" And then the old man would be off about another of those big-belly old veterans' stories about how it was against the Krauts, and the tanks, and the 155-millimeters, and the snow. What a different kind of war the old man had been in! He'd lugged a heavy machine-gun through a forest that must have been a lot like this one, in something called "The Battle of the Bulge." In the eyes of Doris's father it was definitely the most important battle anybody in the world had ever fought. To hear him talk, you'd think every last Nazi sniper was Superman and every last dogface was a genuine American hero, and it was a certified miracle that any one of them was still alive.

Put him out here for ten minutes, Gamble thought, and you wouldn't hear anything about the *Wehrmacht* any more.

Gamble heard the rain before he felt it, a sudden spattering in the leaves of the trees overhead. It almost made him feel good. So the brass had been right about that, anyway. But like everything else in Gamble's line of work, that was both good and bad. Bad because nobody liked slipping and sliding through the underbrush in the wet, good because that meant no

moon to help the creeps with their optics.

They crossed a farm road on the double, looking all around and delighted they found nothing to look at.

Then they were at the edge of the first of the creeps' fields. The crop was tall all around them, almost over their heads, it was so near to harvesting, but except for slipping in the muddy furrows the moving was easier now. They crossed the field in another rush, and Halversen halted them in a strip of woods no more than a hundred feet through.

They all took their positions. Riflemen like Gamble dropped on their bellies at the edge of the next field. Mikros stepped cautiously up to join them, his big carbon-fiber electronic ear flapping in every direction. MacReady handed out spikes to Burton and Coglio, who moved a few steps off, right and left, and planted them in the muddy ground. That was another way rain helped, too. The spikes slid in with only a little grunting; they didn't have to take the risk of pounding them in.

From where he lay Gamble could see the picture building up on MacReady's screen, blue figures and yellow. The blue was what the infrared detectors picked up: heat. The yellow was what the tiny, unfelt trembling of the ground told the seismics. Because the seismic detectors were twenty feet apart, parallax gave you range. IR was better at telling you something was there; but the seismics told you where you could hit it.

According to both seismics and IR something big was shaking the ground no more than a hundred yards away. The picture was only a scribble of lines, but Gamble knew what it had to be. A Jeep, almost certainly kept there with its engine running to give power to the arms and detectors of an outpost of the creeps. The infrared told more. There were half a dozen blue blobs on the screen, much tinier than the bright blotch of the Jeep. Farmers.

The question was, what were they doing?

Gamble hoped, and almost convinced himself, that they were simply a listening post. They didn't seem to be moving around, and their disposition didn't look threatening — two or three of them were actually behind the Jeep, because their images merged with its.

Halversen, back from sweeping the terrain with his night glasses, started toward Gamble, caught a glimpse of the screen, bounded over to MacReady. "Mothereffer, turn it around!" he grated. MacReady had incautiously set up the screen so that it was edge on to the open field. Anybody on the other side might easily pick up its glow.

Maybe they had.

Something plopped among the tall stalks in the middle of the field, and the vast noise and eye-searing light of a flashbang grenade told everyone that the battle had started.

That was one noise and one light. In a moment the whole forest section was noise and light. It was like the biggest damnedest Fourth of July in the history of the Republic, only Gamble wasn't looking at it across a river. He was in the middle of it.

It hadn't been MacReady. It had been somebody

from Assault Team Dog, off a few hundred yards to the right, inadvertently hitting a tripwire or firing at a shadow. That was where the action started, but in a moment it was everywhere.

Halversen was pounding Gamble's shoulder and pointing to the spot indicated on MacReady's screen, where the big something was chugging away.

Gamble nodded, wriggled himself comfortable beside the trunk of a tall pine and fired one burst. A short one. He wasn't hoping to do the Jeep much hurt, only to keep the men around it busy. It was up to Coglio and his compound rifle to do the job.

As soon as he had fired, Gamble rolled over rapidly three times to his left before he lifted his head a quarter of an inch to see what was happening.

Coglio had just pulled the trigger. There was no more noise than an airgun — well, it was an airgun — until the little bus-carrying pencil rocket was well clear of the muzzle. It was going no more than 500 feet a second then. Then, a yard out, its little rocket cut in. Half a second later came the sharp *krik* it made when it went supersonic.

In that moment, return fire from across the field dug a hole where Gamble's head had been before he rolled.

He winced anyway, because he couldn't help it, but that was what he had rolled away for. He wasn't hurt. But Coglio had got his round off and was probably thrashing away himself as fast as he could, while the fire-trail of the rocket lanced into the woods across the field. It must have bashed a few branches on the way. That didn't matter. The little piezo-activated fins bent just enough to keep it on course; the smart fuze would not let itself be set off by contact. The minibus reached the exact range Coglio had set it for. Then, exactly on target, it fired. Fifty grams of high-density powder drove a score of flechettes down on what lay below, Jeep and men. Gamble thought he heard a yell of agony — hoped he heard it — but there was noise from all over now, and no way to be sure.

Someone somewhere had once said what the human ear was like in battle: A cup. It could fill with noise, more noise than its owner had ever heard before, but it could hold just so much noise and the rest just ran out and spent itself. Gamble's ears were full. Muttering crumps from here, sharp rapid-fire clatter from there, the fart sounds of automatic serial grenades on their parachutes — there was no kind of noise that wasn't blasting at him. He did not even distinguish the flash-crack of the round that got Coglio, but he saw the muzzle flare. He aimed at the source of the counterfire and sprayed it, rolling back to his first position. He had time to note that there was a hole where his head had lain that smelled of hot dirt and burnt powder while he got off another burst and rolled away again.

There was fire from both sides and in front, and stray bursts behind the team's position. Parachute flares lighted up the open field. Flashbangs exploded every few seconds. They gave more light than anyone on the team wanted, but a lot less than could do them any good. The trees and the tall crop plants were visible as hell, but whatever was hidden behind them

stayed hidden.

Another burst and another roll put Gamble next to MacReady, juggling his filters and his gain to try to keep the noise of exploding ordnance from swamping his seismics and the flare of HE from drowning the IR traces. Gamble couldn't fire from there. No one in his right mind would draw counterfire on his eyes and ears. But he took a quick look before he rolled away. The seismics showed that, at least, the Jeep engine wasn't running any more, and the moving shapes on the IR weren't moving. The flechettes from the minibus had done their job.

It really had been a yell he'd heard, Gamble decided as he rolled to a new firing position. The creeps were tough fighters, but even they got upset enough to scream when a flechette the size of a tenpenny nail came down through helmet or body armor and spent itself in their soft parts.

Down the line, Team Zebra opened up with its automatic mortars. You couldn't hide the signature of a mortar once it began to fire. Once the gunlayers had punched in azimuth, elevation and fuze setting they were gone, as far as they could get before the counterfire came in. Surprisingly, the farmers were slow. The four mortars got off more than a dozen rounds among them before mortars from the other side punched their clock — and then mortars from Team Poppa returned the favor on the mortars of the creeps.

It was going well, Gamble thought, rolling and firing, rolling and firing. Incoming fire was slower than it should have been. Either the farmers had been caught with their pants down or they simply weren't as well prepared as usual. In the fan of fire just ahead of Team Bravo, MacReady's sensors showed very little activity. Any moment, Gamble decided, Halversen would give a yell and it would be time for the final rush.

The yell didn't come.

A flashbang went off not a dozen yards from Gamble. His eardrums felt as though they had been spiked; his eyes were totally blinded for the moment. But in that split second of violent flare he had caught a glimmer of something overhead.

It was a parafoil.

Gamble froze.

He rubbed his ruined eyes, blinking furiously, trying with as little movement as possible to get back the sight he had lost. It came back slowly, only outlines at first, and flashes of light from the fire zone —

Then he saw the dimmer, scarier flicker from the parafoil overhead, spinning gently down toward them like the seedpod from an elm.

It was a big one. From Mylar wingtip to wingtip it had to be a dozen yards across. Big ones held big hurts. You couldn't tell from looking at it what kind of gifts its bus contained. You couldn't tell how it was fused — proximity, time, motion, IFF, whatever. You could only be sure that it had sensors that were looking for something to hurt, and that it was bad news. This was no minibus with a couple dozen flechettes. This could ruin your day seriously.

(Continued to page 38)

It Came from the Slushpile

By Bruce Bethke
Art by Larry Blamire

The place stank. A queer, mingled stench that only the manuscript-buried offices of fiction magazines know. Groping for the light switch, Rex Manly, the two-fisted editor of *Stupefying Stories Magazine*, led two junior college interns into the cramped and windowless back office.

"This is the slush pile," Rex said in his deep, mature voice. "Normally we try to stay on top of it, but our associate editor quit six months ago and we couldn't afford to replace her. So we've let it get a little out of hand." Rex found the light switch; after a few crackles from a dying transformer, flickery blue fluorescent light flooded the room. Sheila, the tall, willowy, blonde intern, gasped; Janine, the other intern, bit her lip and fought back the tears.

"There are some six thousand unsolicited manuscripts here," Rex continued. "Of those, six hundred are worth reading, and one hundred worth publishing. At best, twelve suit our current needs and budget well enough to be purchased.

"Your job," Rex said, as he laid his massive hand on the manila-colored heap, "is to sift through this and find the dozen gems that *might* be hiding here." Suddenly, the stack of manuscripts shifted and began collapsing around him like an erasable bond avalanche. With an agility uncommon in a man his size, Rex leapt clear. "You get half an hour for lunch," he said calmly, as if nothing had happened. "We see there isn't a clock in here, so we'll send someone by at noon to check up on you. Coffee's in the art department; if you didn't brown-bag there's a Burger King up the street." The two women were still overwhelmed by the Herculean — or rather, Augean — task they faced, and asked no questions. Rex closed the door as he left.

"Ready for lunch yet?" the shapely brunette asked as she arched her back against the doorframe, and with studied carelessness caught a polished fingernail on the hem of her skirt, tugging it up to expose a flash of silk-stockinged thigh.

"In a minute, Gina," Rex said to the Art Director, without looking up. "We've got a really tough comma fault here we're trying to nail down." Gina pouted and sighed heavily, reminding Rex that it was dangerous to leave her with idle time on her hands. "Tell you what," Rex said. "Do us a favor and tell those two interns working the slush pile that it's time for lunch, okay?" Without answering, the Art Director turned and sauntered down the hall, her high heels clicking out a seductive Morse code on the terrazzo floor.

This was followed, in short order, by a piercing scream.

Rex vaulted over his desk and ran out into the hall, to find Gina wailing hysterically. Mascara streamed down her cheeks like oil from a leaky rocker arm cover. "What happened?" he demanded as he grabbed her roughly.

"You're hurting my roughly!" she cried. Rex relaxed his grip; Gina sobbed, buried her face in his broad chest, and said, "It's awful! Terrible! Hideous! Grue — !"

He slapped her. "Excess adjectives!"

Gina shuddered, then regained her composure. "Sheila and Janine, they're ... oh, it's too horrible!" A small crowd was gathering around the door of the interns' office, so Rex helped Gina into a chair and bullied his way through the staffers.

"Does anyone here know — ?" He stopped, the question caught in his throat. Sheila and Janine lay on the floor, two crushed, ink-smeared corpses half-covered in manuscripts.

"The slush pile must have imploded," said Phil Jennings, the Science Fact Editor, who'd slipped through the crowd to stand at Rex's right elbow. "No one's ever researched the critical mass of unpublished manuscripts. They may undergo gravitational collapse like a black hole."

Rex crouched; Phil crouched with him. "But the ink stains," Rex said softly.

Phil gingerly reached out and touched Janine's



face. "Still fresh," he said.

"Then at least we're getting through about using new typewriter ribbons." Rex stood, resolve giving strength to his voice. "Okay, let's get them out of there. Jerry, Dave," he pointed to two of the keyliners, "get in there and get their feet. Phil, take Sheila; we'll take Janine." Cautiously, the keyliners waded into the office, but before they'd gotten more than ankle deep they both slipped and fell on the erasable bond. "Are you okay?" Rex called out.

"Think so," answered Jerry, who was closest to the center of the heap, "but there's something funny going on here. My foot's caught on something."

"Oh my God," Dave gasped.

Behind Jerry, a large, white- and black-speckled pseudopod was slowly extruding from the slush pile. "Phil?" Rex asked calmly, his voice belying the cold horror he felt. "What do you make of that?"

Phil leaned forward, squinted, took off his glasses and cleaned them on the tail of his shirt, put them back on, and then squinted again. "Hard to tell from this distance," he said softly, "but it looks like a plagiarization of an old *Twilight Zone* script."

"What are you ... ?" Jerry rolled around and caught a glimpse of the thing slithering up behind him. His scream catalyzed the rest into action.

"Give me your hand!" Rex bellowed as he leapt into the room. In moments he'd wrenched Dave free and pushed him out the door, but by then the pseudopod had Jerry and was drawing him deeper into the pile. "Someone find a rope!" Rex shouted. Fighting for balance, he waded in deeper. Jerry clawed for him like a drowning man; their fingers touched briefly, and then Rex lost his footing and went down.

"Hold on, Rex!" Phil shouted. He pulled out his butane lighter, set it to *High*, and charged in, wielding the lighter like a flaming sword. With four wild slashes, he freed Rex.

"Now for Jerry!" Rex bellowed.

"It's too late!" Phil screamed. Rex plowed back into the manuscripts, while Phil tried to stave off the advancing pseudopodia, but a sixty-page rewrite of Genesis 5:1-24 rose up and slapped the lighter out of Phil's hand. Then the slush pile began building into a great wave that towered over them. "Rex! Get out!" Phil yelled as he dove headfirst through the doorway. Reluctantly, Rex followed. "Shut it!" Phil shouted. Most of the staffers had already run away, and those that remained were paralyzed with fear, but one of the free-lance book reviewers had something of his wits left about him and he pulled the door shut, just as the heap smashed against it with a great soggy *thump*.

Rex sagged against the wall. "Jerry," he said softly. "Oh Jerry, we're sorry."

Dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex, Gina gave Rex a consoling hug. "There's nothing you could have done," she said.

Resolve flooded back into Rex, and he began issuing commands. "You there," he barked, pointing at the surviving production crew, "find something to barricade this doorway."

"Phil!" he snapped. "What is that thing?"

Phil took off his glasses, chewed the earpiece for a bit, then shrugged and said, "Beats the hell out of me."

"We pay you two hundred dollars a month for Science Facts," Rex growled, "and all you can say is —"

"Hey, I only minored in Biology!" Phil said defensively. "I majored in Philosophy. You want a philosopher's guess about it?" Rex said nothing, so Phil continued. "Okay, here's the hard-science guess: It's a cellulose lifeform that mimics manuscripts for protective coloration. Maybe it's symbiotic with the scuzzy blue mold that grows in old coffee cups. Kathryn was always leaving half-empty cups in there."

Rex shook his head. "Too 1940-ish. Old hat."

"Okay," Phil said, "here's the philosophical guess. It's divine retribution for letting manuscripts sit for six months."

"We never buy theological fantasy." Rex thought a moment more, then reached a decision. "It doesn't matter where it came from. The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Get more lighters," the book reviewer said. "Torch the sucker."

"We'd rather not," Rex said. "The building's a firetrap."

"Let's lure it into the paper cutter," Gina suggested. "Do a Conan on it. Fight hacks with hacks, I say."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Phil answered. "It's extremely amorphous. It may even be a colony organism. Cut it in half and we may well end up with two monsters."

"Do you have a better idea?" Rex asked.

"I think we should attack its component parts," Phil said. "If we can disperse them, we might destroy its will to exist."

"Huh?" said Gina.

"We must reject it," Phil said portentously. "Reject every last piece of it."

"I know where there are some rejection slips!" the book reviewer shouted. He dashed over to the managing editor's office, and in moments returned bearing two fistfuls of paper.

Rex took one, and pushed the other into Phil's hands. "If it gets past me ... , " Rex began. Phil nodded.

"Oh, be careful!" Gina sobbed as she hugged Rex.

"Easy, kid," he said coolly. "You're getting mascara on my shirt." Then he looked to Phil. "Ready?" Phil nodded.

Luckily, the staffers Rex had sent running to find barricade materials had simply kept running, so all he had to do was kick open the door, step into the breach, and start passing out the slips. In seconds, though, it became obvious that something was terribly wrong. Instead of being driven back, the thing was surging forward, swelling, growing; it even formed a pseudohead and started catching the slips on the fly, like a spaniel jumping for Doggie Snax. "What the

hell?" Phil wondered aloud. Then he looked at the slips he held:

Stupefying Stories

Dear Writer,

Thanks for showing us the enclosed manuscript. We've read it and are sorry to say we do not think it's quite right for *Stupefying* at this time. Please don't regard this as a reflection on the quality of your work; we receive a great many publishable stories but simply don't have the space to print every one we like.

Because of the great number of submissions we receive, we cannot make more specific comments. But again, thanks for giving us the opportunity to consider it, and we hope you find a market for it elsewhere.

Cordially,
Rex Manly, Editor

"Get out of there!" Phil screamed. "You're encouraging it!" Rex hastily backed out of the room; the thing followed him, swirling about his feet and emitting happy yipping sounds. They barely got the door shut in time; when it realized that Rex had gotten away it began furiously hurling itself at the door, and it took both Rex and Phil to hold the door closed.

"What went wrong?" Rex demanded. "Analysis, Mr. Jennings!"

"We need something colder and blunter," Phil answered. "We need to stun it, depress it, crush its ego." The thing built up into another great wave and crashed against the door; this time the book reviewer had to throw his shoulder into it, too. "And soon!" Phil shouted.

"The previous editor used slips like that," Rex said. "Can you hold the door while we look for some?" Not waiting for an answer, Rex sprinted back to his office and began rummaging around in the filing cabinets.

"I hate working on spec," the book reviewer growled.

In a few minutes, Rex returned. "These are all we could find," he said. "Will they do?" Phil took one and read:

STUPEFYING Stories and Science

Dear Contributor,

We regret that we are unable to use the enclosed material. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider it.

The Editors

"It might," Phil said, "it just might." With Gina's help, Rex laid out a semi-circle of rejection slips in front of the door. When the last one was in place, he yelled, "Now!", and Phil and the book reviewer leapt clear. The door burst open with a violence that nearly tore it from its hinges, and the disgusting, pulsating mass slithered forward, found the first rejection slip, paused ...

"It's working!" Phil crowed.

The slush pile shuddered, drew back slightly, and began whimpering. This quickly built into a spastic quivering, and the pile began sloughing off return envelopes and loose stamps.

"Is it dying?" Gina asked.

Phil wiped the perspiration from his glasses, peered closely at the trembling hulk, and said, "I'm not sure."

"I'll show you how to make sure!" the book reviewer shouted as he ran up the hall. "We give it the *coup de grace!*" He found a typewriter, cranked in a sheet of letterhead, and began frantically clacking away.

"What are you doing?" Gina asked.

"What I do best," he said with a wicked grin. "Crushing an ego." He finished the letter, yanked it out of the typewriter, and ran back to show it to the others. "One look at this, and it will shrivel up and die!"

"A bit strong, don't you think?" Rex observed.

It read:

Dear Talentless Hack,

Were you by chance going to the town landfill on the same day that you mailed your manuscript? We ask because it appears that you have gotten confused, discarded your story, and mailed your garbage instead.

In the future you may save yourself postage by simply not submitting to us at all. We will be watching for your name; rest assured that we will never forgive you for attempting to foist this load of pathetic crapola off on us.

With malice aforethought,
The Editors

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea," Phil said.

"Nonsense," the book reviewer countered. "I've done this a thousand times. Just watch." He slipped the letter under the nearest edge of the slush pile; within seconds the thing was smoking, shaking, and letting out hideous groans. "You see?" the book reviewer said smugly — and in less time than it takes to describe it, the slush pile rose up, quivering and roaring, and squashed him flatter than a thin-crust pizza.

"Good God!" Rex yelled. "That only enraged it! Run!" he shouted, as if Gina and Phil needed instructions.

The thing surged down the hallway after them,

bellowing angrily and engulfing chairs, desks, ashtrays — anything that stood in its way. There was no plan to their flight, only sheer adrenalin panic, and so they wound up dashing into the Art Department two steps ahead of the thing. Phil slammed the door in its pseudoface; sinews straining, Rex held the door shut while Phil tipped over a few filing cabinets and pushed them together to form a barricade.

Frustrated, the pile drew back and then threw itself against the door with all its force. Miraculously, the filing cabinets held. "Well, we're safe for the moment," Phil said between gasps. "It can't get in."

"Just one problem," Rex noted. "We can't get out either." The three of them looked around. There was indeed no other way out: no window, no door, no conveniently large air duct ...

"We're trapped!" Gina wailed.

"Get a grip on yourself!" Rex shrieked. "This is no time for hysteria!"

"I'm trapped in a dead end by a monster that wants me for lunch!" Gina sobbed. "Can you think of a better time?"

"She's right, Rex," Phil said softly. "Sooner or later that thing will realize that it can ooze around the barricade. We're done for." He took off his glasses and slowly, mournfully, cleaned them on his shirt tail one last time.

"NEVER!" Rex bellowed, finding his full imperative strength at last. "We do not buy stories that end in futility!"

"Look at us!" he commanded, as he stalked about the room gesturing wildly. "What are we? Three people trapped in a blind alley by an unstoppable monster? No! We are three *archetypes!* The brilliant, scientific, nearly omniscient mind! The curvaceous, creamy, eminently rescuable heroine! The aggressive, dynamic, mightily-thewed hero! We have an obligation to beat that thing!"

"You! Phil!" he ordered. "Go discover something! Me! I!" Rex paused, stunned with the realization that he'd dropped his editorial plural. "I'll think of an ingenious plan to take advantage of whatever you discover. And Gina? You —," Rex sat down, and grumpily put his chin in his palm. "Aw hell, go make some coffee or something."

As the weight of his new responsibility settled onto Phil, he sat up alertly and said, "Listen! It's stopped!" Rex's ears perked up; the thing had indeed stopped hammering at the barricade. Phil crept to the door and peered out. Rex followed, and saw the quiescent beast lying in the hall.

"Is it dead?" Rex asked hopefully.

"Do archetypical monsters ever die?" Phil answered scornfully. "It's dormant, of course."

"So now would be the perfect time to strike?"

"If we had a weapon," Phil agreed.

"We're out of coffee," Gina said, "will tea do?" She held up a Salada tea bag.

Rex snatched the bag out of her hand. "Of course!" he cried, the light of inspiration burning fiercely in his eyes.

"Didn't know you liked tea so much," Gina mut-

tered.

"Don't you see?" he shouted, holding up the tiny paper tag on the end of the string. "Gina, honey, can you reduce our logo and make it fit on this?"

"Well," she said dubiously, "normally it'd take a week to keyline and shoot the stats, but I think —"

"Don't think! Do!" He spun around. "Phil! Help me with our paper stock. I want something truly obnoxious. Fluorescent Yellow will do, Blaze Orange would be better! And find some glue sticks!" Rex started dumping boxes on the floor and searching through the resulting heap.

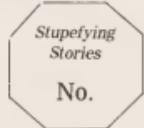
"What — ?" Phil started to ask.

"We," Rex said proudly, "are going to create the *ultimate* rejection slip. One that crushes all hope, destroys all incentive, leaves no room for argument or interpretation —"

"Well, we'd better hurry," Phil said ominously. "I don't know what it's doing out there, but I'm sure I won't like it when I find out."

*** * ***

An hour later they were nearly ready. They'd had to modify the design slightly as they went along to suit the materials at hand, but the result —



— on a postage stamp-sized slip of Neon Lime Green stock, was coming off the copier. "Remember," Rex was saying, "we hit it hard, we hit it fast, we take no prisoners —"

"And we hit it soon," Phil added as he peered out the door. "I've figured out what it's doing. It's metastasizing."

Rex stopped short. "What?"

"Look at it," Phil said. "Those lumps all over its back; they're buds. It's getting ready to reproduce."

"Good grief," Rex gasped, "you mean we'll have more of those things?"

"Worse," Phil said pensively. "If I'm right, in its larval stage it takes the form of an unsolicited manuscript. In a few minutes this place is going to be crawling with stories: thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of stories. Stories about flying saucers, deals with the devil, time travelers killing their grandparents," the panic began rising in Phil's voice, "evil galactic empires, Celtic witches, sentient dragons, killer robots disguised as toasters." Phil was bordering on total hysteria now. "Rewrites of the Old Testament! Star Trek ripoffs! 21st Century Barbarians!"

"Rex!" Phil screamed. "There are enough nuclear holocaust stories in there to wipe out this entire solar system!"

"Gina!" Rex barked. "Hurry up with those

(Continued to page 47)



Merchant Dying

By Paul A. Gilster
Art by Bob Eggleton



It is just past four in the morning. The gears of the clock grind in the moonlight as Merchant bolts awake, rubbing a palm sticky with sweat over throbbing eyes. Sara is a tight, hunched shape next to him; she hugs her pillow with both hands. The moonlight catches her eyes and ricochets, an echo made of light.

"What is it?" she says, and there is a tone of exasperation in her voice, still throaty from sleep.

Merchant pulls up his knees and puts his chin on them, wrapping his arms around his legs. He stares straight ahead into a room that seems filled with light at 4:13 a.m.

"Go to sleep," he says roughly.

Sara sits up, stretches. She touches her right hand lightly to his cheek.

"Are you feeling bad?" She asks this

quietly, and her words are almost lost in the rustling of the sheets as Merchant draws himself up and out of bed to stand in the long moonlight. He is like a man carved out of white stone.

"I ache all over," he says, rubbing his arms. "Every time I get to sleep my muscles hurt and I wake up."

"It's too early for another pill," Sara says.

But Merchant does not answer. He walks into the bathroom and opens the medicine cabinet. His tiny pills rattle in their vial.

"Please, honey," he calls out. "Go back to sleep."

There is no further word from the bedroom, but as he swallows the pill, he hears her drawing the sheets around her. The birds are chattering outside the screen in a loud cadence. Their chirping



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is intense; they are driving their high tones like little, white-hot nails into the house.

Merchant draws on his bathrobe and walks down the stairs, across the small landing, and then, feeling his way in utter blackness, down a second flight of stairs to the hallway that leads to the kitchen. Here, in the depths of the house, the arrogant bird calls are muffled, and break harmlessly against the outer walls.

He draws cold water from the tap, fills the kettle, and puts it on to boil. He is shaking now, a tremolo that causes him to bang the coffee carafe on the faucet hard enough that he inspects it for cracks. Putting it back down, he places a filter cone on top of it and fills the cone with coffee.

While the water heats, he goes to the phone and dials in a number, along with his private access code. The screen stays blank while he types the password that will put him through to Tullock. Finally, a face appears. It is small, but thick lenses make the eyes large, like big gray marbles.

"Lee!" Tullock exclaims.

"I couldn't sleep," Merchant says. "Is anything going on?"

"You're not losing sleep over this bird, are you, Lee? She's in good hands until you get back."

Merchant is annoyed. He does not like questions to be answered with questions. His head throbs. "Damn you anyway. You're not my mother," he says.

Tullock nods and there is the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Sure. You want me to run some data at you?"

"Please." He misses this man, his daily associate for fourteen years, and as the screen darkens and rows of numbers begin to scroll up the smooth surface, he is filled with an intolerable loneliness.

He studies the screen and tries to ignore his suddenly churning stomach. The coffee water is boiling now; its gurgling is a homey counterpoint to these numbers and symbols that have crossed space and time to reach his kitchen. The numbers are like snakes. They weave and dance to their own internal rhythms.

Merchant has not called up this information to study it, but because it is his link with a living thing, bequeathed to him by three previous generations, that now bores through the dark curve of spacetime. Merchant is holding its hand across the void, feeling a pulse still throbbing. Although these signals have traveled over eleven years to reach him, they are not old. They flicker in a present dilated by pain.

The data dances. Merchant tries to picture this probe of gold and silver drinking information across the electromagnetic spectrum, but he cannot summon it up. Like the face of a lost love, it will not quite resolve.

He overrides the data stream and says into the open circuit, "How about giving me some stars to look at?"

"Sure, sure," Tullock mutters. "As though I didn't have anything better to do." And now the numbers are replaced by tiny points of light. No one

star stands out among the others. From the information printing out across the bottom of the screen, Merchant knows that the craft is looking back along its path of flight. One of these dots, one of the weakest, should be the Sun.

Merchant thanks Tullock for his time, but before he can break the connection Tullock interrupts him. "How are you feeling, Lee?" he asks softly. He is clearly apprehensive, and Merchant feels sorry for him. There is nothing he can do to make this easier.

"About the same, I guess," he says, for he has begun in the past week to lie. "Thanks."

Tullock smiles and the screen goes blank. Merchant now attends to the coffee, having to refill the kettle because he has let it boil dry. The coffee is a delicate Indonesian, but as he sips from his mug it seems dank and lifeless. He drinks half of it before his stomach lurches again, and he runs to the bathroom retching.

At breakfast, Sara scolds him about the coffee and feeds him toast and warm milk. He has a doctor appointment at ten and goes to it absently. It will be like the other appointments, the same tests, the same cheerful nurses. Merchant recognizes the little glint of fear that shows in their eyes. He thinks they are afraid that at some point in all this he will no longer be able to hold death in, that it will rise up and engulf them all like smoke.

Now he walks up the stairs and through the door. The nurses will see to it that he does not have to wait; although he is habitually early to all appointments, they will escort him directly down the bright corridors. Merchant enters the examining room. His head is turned to one side, his eyes down as the usual functions are measured: blood pressure, temperature, pulse. All goes into his record, now a thick black volume in the nurse's hand.

Dr. Fussell is a woman of perhaps forty-five years. Merchant and she share the same birthday, November 11. She has won his respect, for not once in the long diagnosis and treatment has she offered any false hope. For this he is profoundly grateful.

Now Dr. Fussell peers and pokes at his torso. Her eyes are bloodshot and shadowed by circles, reflecting the lights of the monitors. Blue and red flashes burst like fireworks within them.

"Will I get pneumonia?" Merchant asks as she taps upon him.

"Pneumonia!" She hammers out the word. "Why are you worried about pneumonia? You got enough troubles, pal."

"Everybody gets it right before they die. It's what really kills you, isn't it?"

Dr. Fussell swears absently and leads his hand to the monitor. Lights arc. She writes in the black book and turns on him.

"You're not going to go soft on me, are you?" Her voice is gravelly and she frowns at him.

"Not me," he says, but the words come out louder than he intends.

"Well, good, because there's no change here."

"May I smoke a cigarette?" he asks.



"I can think of no reason why not."

"The pleasures of the damned," says Merchant. He lights a Pall Mall. Smoking is, for some reason, one of the few things that does not make him feel sick to his stomach.

"How's your gadget doing?" Dr. Fussell asks, perched on the corner of the examination table.

"Very well. In fact, the strength of the signal has everyone surprised, considering the distance."

She nods her encouragement, but Merchant stops and looks away. The lines of his face are taut. For a moment, there is silence. "Am I going to last until August?" he asks finally. "I'd like to be there when it arrives."

Her eyes have softened. She shakes her head. "I don't think so, Lee."

So they talk of other things, specifically Sara, the new exhibit at the art museum and, because the question of his sleeping comes up, she hands him a prescription for yet another bottle of pills. He will fill it and take them, as he has filled and taken all the others. Were it not for Sara, he reflects, he would not take these infusions of drugs. He would let his body blossom with its illness, consuming him with the only energies he has left. He would walk into the woods and become a stone.

Merchant drives his van through heavy noonday traffic, thinking of Sara. She is slipping away from him, and he cannot bring her back because he does not remember how. His instincts have been dissolved by chemicals. He is a trans-human creature produced by a laboratory. Toxic Man.

A fine rain has begun. Merchant moves down a long, straight avenue flanked by palms. The sea rustles beyond the sound of engine and rain. The air is crisp with salt.

Yes, Merchant thinks, gripping the steering wheel very tightly, there is a new Sara too, a reserved Sara who will no longer show anger despite the provocation. A woman who is taking in his impending death with a certain degree of calculation. She is in that process of assessing odds that women bring to life's crises. He reflects that there is no limit to what women can stand. They are the ultimate survivors. Strip them of family, of friends, drive them from their home; still they endure. As Sara endures.

Something blue scuttles into the road. Later, Merchant will recall a young face, perhaps twelve years old, eyes open a little too wide, as though only now realizing the chance he is taking. Dark blue pants and a Navy blue windbreaker. A truck is between Merchant and this boy. Its red taillights have winked on and it is fishtailing on the slick pavement. Merchant slams his foot down and feels the traction of his tires go.

These are the last things he sees for twenty-four hours: the sight of the truck's taillights grown gigantic, the eruption of his windshield, a flash of the blue windbreaker against the pavement. There is no pain whatsoever.

During these hours when Merchant floats in the dreamless void, he is taken by ambulance to the hos-

pital, where he is given still more medication. He rests in a small private room with beige walls. The bandage on his head covers one eye and extends all the way around to the back of his neck. When he moves, groaning, on the bed, Sara's hand clutches his, squeezing it. Her face is composed; her expression does not change.

Merchant floats in his void, self-contained, an embryonic capsule afloat in a strange, flat sea. His body chugs and purrs in the great act of repair.

But this lasts twenty-four hours only. By the next afternoon, the rain has stopped. The sun is a pale hoop through low stratus, the buildings outside the window shimmering in soft haze. This is when Merchant sits up, prodded by the great crack-like pain in his head. Light floods his newly opened eyes. He vomits.

In another hour he has eaten a thin broth and has begun to remember the accident. "The boy," he asks. "The blue windbreaker."

"Nothing but bruises. Nobody got hurt but you." It is one of the nurses who has spoken, but Merchant barely hears her. There are too many sounds, each much too loud: the chatter of horns and swish of trucks, the rattle of the air conditioning vents, the hollow sound of the dishes on his tray as he moves them about.

He sees Sara come around the end of the bed. She places her face so close to his that her breath warms his cheek. "You've got a concussion, Lee. That's all it is."

"That's right, Dr. Merchant," says a short, stocky nurse who has suddenly come into view. She leans over him from the other corner of the bed. Her face is at right angles to his. "Quite a knock that was. Right through the windshield. You could have been cut to ribbons."

Merchant has already sunk back on the bed. The walls of the room seem to be rising up and folding about him. He only manages to say, "Sara, hold my hand," before the sky goes black. He is hardening inside a smoky egg. For a moment he feels Sara's hand in his, but quickly even his hands are gone.

That night, Merchant dreams. It is as if his mind must now release the images it has stored during his undreaming stupor. It is the monsoon of dreams. He is with Sara at a cafe before they married. The boy in the blue windbreaker is his son. He is killed in a freak accident on a strange, garish plain where the pelting rain is acid that eats at his van.

In the early afternoon of the next day, Sara brings Tullock to see him. Tullock's round face and gleaming lenses hover next to the bed, eyes cautious and narrow. His jollity is forced; he buzzes on about Merchant's recovery and the prospects of their having dinner after Merchant is released.

"Which is today!" he cries, and Sara nods in confirmation.

"Although — and they mean this, Lee — you're going to have to take it very slow," she says.

"Get your strength up," says Tullock.

Merchant sees the heavy shadow under Tullock's eyes and realizes that he has sacrificed sleep to be

here. He is filled with deep affection for the little man, but the irony of Tullock's last remark has choked him. Tears fill his eyes, but he knows he must not laugh or his head will hurt.

He clears his throat; he thinks. It does not matter whether he goes home today or not. What he wants is some news of the probe. But Tullock, he sees, is hiding something from him. He is speaking in generalities, and the tone of his voice is slightly too high-pitched. Merchant confronts him, accuses him of holding something back. He demands to know what is going on. His arm comes down hard on the bed and he winces.

Tullock's face lengthens, sags. He squints at Merchant. "We lost the signal last night," he says. "Totally."

Merchant sits back. He is not alarmed; he is thinking furiously. He points out to Tullock that this has happened once before. Tullock nods, discussing the situation in some detail.

Sara, worried about Merchant, becomes exasperated. "Can't you just send it a new command?" she asks. "You did that with the Saturn orbiter."

But Tullock explains that it would take over a decade for their signal to reach it. They can only wait as the probe, designed for such emergencies, tries to repair itself.

"We won't know," adds Merchant, "until it's succeeded. Or failed."

She gazes at him. His eyes have brightened. She thinks that it was better after all for him to have learned Tullock's secret.

"Hey, look at me!" says Merchant, touching his bandage. "I'm going home. I cheated death!"

Into the sudden silence he adds, "Gallows humor."

So he goes home. On his back in the ambulance, he sees leaves swaying gently in green sunlight. He sees a deep sky streaked with cirrus.

Although within the week the effects of Merchant's accident have subsided, the injury has seemed to aggravate his condition. Again he is unable to keep food down. His excursions become limited to occasional walks, and soon these are too tiring for him. He becomes an indoor person. The smells of the outside overpower him — grass and earth smells, acrid car exhausts, the ammonia smell of insects.

This is Merchant's schedule as he begins his final summer: awake at 7:00, when the sleeping potion wears off. A large glass of milk and a pain pill after dry cereal for breakfast. A nap from 10:00 to 12:00. Awake at noon for another pain pill. Broth for lunch, dry toast. At 4:00, a pain pill and milk. He calls Tullock, who has left the graveyard shift and now works from noon to 8:00. Dinner is at 6:00, always agonizing as they experiment to see what he can keep down. At 8:00, a final pain pill, a sleeping pill, and the day ends. Sara now sleeps in the room across the hall, because Merchant thrashes restlessly in a futile attempt to be comfortable.

One day Sara comes into the room during his call to Tullock. She waits quietly as he discusses on-board

repair strategies and their chances of success. When he is through, she says, "It's going to come back. I know it."

Merchant wheels on her savagely; his face tightens in fury. "What do you know about it? It's been out there over ninety years! We don't even know what's wrong with it!"

He bangs his fist on the little table and the glass of milk spills on the carpet, becoming a dark and widening pool.

"Damn!" he shouts. "Damn!"

Trying to get up for a towel, he is overcome with dizziness and stumbles. The glass breaks beneath his foot. Its fragments throw sunlight in strange designs on the ceiling, on the wall, on him. He looks up for Sara but she has left the room.

Merchant is afraid. He sits alone in the half-light. Since the death of his father early in his childhood, he has feared hospitals deeply. He hates their metallic cleanliness, the smell of their antiseptics. And with the swollen ego of the dying, he has announced without consulting Sara that he will die at home.

But now he has a revelation. It comes to him somehow in the prismatic glow of the broken glass. He walks carefully into the hall, trailing one hand against the door. His face is flushed with fever. He takes her by the shoulders, then puts his arms around her.

She holds him so hard that he almost cries out. That night she helps him pack his suitcase.

Merchant's hospital room has a big, adjustable bed, a single wooden chair, and a painted bureau. He can move his bed so that he sees the scabrous branches of an oak outside his window. He lies on the bed and feels the late afternoon sun. The soft, mottled light ripples with the motion of the leaves.

He has said from the beginning that he will die quickly if he goes back to the hospital, but in fact he lingers into July. He feels nothing at all save that it is becoming harder and harder to stay awake. Sometimes he is aware of other people in the room with him. A nurse with a familiar, soothing voice pats his arm as she changes his IV. He hears Dr. Fussell's rasping voice, and once Tullock's. And Sara. He feels her presence even as he sleeps.

Merchant has no last words. In the final week of his life, he is slipping so rapidly that he does not speak again. It does not occur to him to try. His subconscious presents him with a parade of images from his life. He thinks that some are inaccurate but cannot say which. He sees a dusty road in Iowa strangled by green. He hears his father's voice.

On the last day, he suddenly snaps to consciousness. He sees Sara sitting next to him; she is holding his hand. He looks into her eyes and sees that she is looking at him from a great distance. Now he knows that this is not their parting. They parted before, somewhere between the knowing and the doing, between the death and the dying. He does not know when this was, but thinks it must have been on the day of the broken glass, shortly after which he fell silent forever.

(Continued to page 46)

Minutes of the Last Meeting at Olduvai

By Steven R. Boyett

Art By Courtney Skinner

"My fellow *australopithecines*..."

Og banged his branch against the cave floor to bring the assembly to order. "I'd like to start tonight's meeting by thanking the females for gathering wood for the fire; I know it's hard to find dry wood because of the rains —" he glanced upward — not that any of us are *complaining*, you understand," he added.

There were grunts of approval.

"All right," he continued. "Now, Zook, who's probably our best thinker, has been working on an idea that he says can't sit for another full Moon. As your duly elected tribal head I have granted his request to address tonight's meeting. I think we can save the clay-pot-improvement reports, herd-movement assessments, and weapons-innovation debates for another time. Any objections?"

None of the group raised a hairy hand, but one of the Hunters, a flint-chipper named Crug, muttered, "Do it matter? Always he talk. Talk, talk. Everyone is talk." He shook his head.

The group listened politely; most of them pitied Crug's difficulty with the new language.

Og motioned Zook into the semicircle formed by the Tribe.

Zook was an old thinker in his late twenties. His few remaining teeth were rotting. The hair covering his stooped body was thinning, wiry, and gray. He stared at the fire a moment as if hypnotized. Orange points of light winked in his deep brown eyes. He smiled and reached a hand toward the flame, then drew it back and turned to face the group.

He rubbed his crotch thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "I'm not one to make a fuss, but I think the survival of our people is threatened."

There was much stirring and muttering and pulling on penises. "Two problems face us, really," he continued when it settled down. "One has led to the other. The first is our ability to think, and the second is our ability to talk."

There was a shocked silence that made the fire's crackle seem loud. Finally Crug said, "What? Say he what?"

"Care to elaborate a bit, Zook?" asked Og, finger-

ing his branch.

"My pleasure." Zook tried to draw himself to his full, four-foot height and failed pathetically. He picked up a branch from the pile at the feet of the females and tossed it onto the fire. He watched it catch the flames, then turned back to the group.

"I'm an old man," he began, "and I've had a lot of time to think. Often I think back and remember the Before. I remember how I would feel the sun on my fur. I would just... feel it, nothing more. Nowadays I wonder, What is this, the sun? How can I feel it but not touch it?" He raised a hand above their heads. "I see the lightning and wonder if it comes from the Moon. How far away is the Moon?" The hand lowered. "Before, I just felt the sunlight, saw the lightning, watched the Moon."

"But Zook," said a hunter named Kee, "how can wondering be bad? I mean, if we didn't question things, we wouldn't have the fire, or the spear, or anything." He glanced around at the others. "Am I right?"

"I'm not finished!" Zook snapped. His tone changed to mimic Kee's: "Yes, we have the fire and spear, and all that, but what has it taken away from us? What have we given up to have these things?"

He squatted on his haunches and rubbed his palms together. "We judge everything now. Before, it was Oh, look, there's a bird; and Oh, look, there's a mountain. Now it's all, Is it right? Is it wrong? Is it good, is it bad?" He shook his head. "Yesterday I invented a pair of moccasins — there's nothing to them; I could show you faster than you could eat a rat — but it took me all day, because every time I thought I had it right, I'd ask myself, Are these good moccasins? Are they the sort of moccasins I want to invent? What's wrong with them? Maybe they could fit better. And I'd just start all over again. I went through a whole antelope skin, when all I wanted was to sew something around my feet to keep the damn rocks from hurting them. I can't look at something anymore without deciding whether I like it! Because we judge, we think we have the right to judge."

"But Zook," complained Bert, whose maimed leg



forced him to sew and cook with the females while the others hunted, "we live ever so much better because of our brains. We eat better; we're warmer in the winter — I remember being awfully hungry and cold most of the time, Before." He shivered.

"We eat better," countered Zook, "because our brains gave us language, and that helped us with the hunt. But what else has it done? Before, I knew that Kee didn't like me because he'd bare his teeth and throw shit at me. Now, though, we'll meet at the waterhole, or he'll wave to me while I'm pissin' on a tree, and he'll say, 'What's new, Zook? How's your thinking going?' And I have to ask myself, What is behind his words?" Zook pounded his knuckles on the cave floor. "It's all one big headache," he said.

"I liked my mate better before she learned how to talk," joked one of the Hunters. The others laughed.

Zook glared at him. "Before," he said coolly, "we didn't used to make jokes at the expense of others."

Og shouldered his club. "All this is fine and good, Zook, but how is our survival threatened?"

"When the leopard attacks the gazelle, Og," replied Zook, "the gazelle doesn't *think* about running away, or what its options are, or what, exactly, this leap by the leopard really means. The gazelle just runs. Us —" he snorted. "We *think* about that pouncing leopard, then we decide on a course of action, and then, finally, we move. And the gazelle goes on grazing while we find out what a leopard looks like on the inside."

He stood. "Do the monkeys fall out of trees and break their necks because they were reaching for the Moon? No — we do! Now we have speech, where Before there was none — and now we have misunderstanding and confusion where Before there was none!" He massaged his prominent supraorbital ridge, then ran a hand along the bony crest at the top of his head. "We can become so preoccupied with this thinking nonsense that we can lose our sense of the things around us. I've been so taken with my new Idea that I nearly walked off a cliff! Why? Because I was lost in thought! Because of thinking, I might have been dead and broken at the bottom of the gorge, and who knows where these leaky old bones would have ended up?"

Og merely shrugged, pinched a louse from his fur, and crushed it between forefinger and recently opposable thumb. "Even if you're right, what can we do about it? We can't make ourselves not know what we already know."

Narrow brows wrinkled throughout the cave.

Crug stood. "Talk," he said. "I hear only you talk. Thinking — ha!" He spat toward the fire. "I not liking your thought stuff. It — it make me wanting to scratch inside my head."

"I think Zook has a point, Og," piped Bert. "I think we're a little more . . . distant from things than we used to be. I mean, we talk now about 'the animals' as though we're something apart from them. But Before, I don't remember thinking I was any different from the rest of them."

"I don't remember thinking anything at all," quipped a voice from the back.

Bert ignored it. "And what about our parents?" he continued, rising now that he was gaining momentum. He cocked a slim hip. "We started doing these things almost all at once, and so fast that we don't even remember what it was like for them." One delicate hand went against his bony chest; the thin fingers splayed. "But at night I hear the voices of the Ones Before. We all hear them. They don't say anything, but they're happy voices. Content voices." Slim hand lowered to sharp-bladed hip. "Sure, our parents were afraid of us. But to them we were still a part of them, and they were a part of everything. But us — we knew we weren't like them... just because we knew." He shrugged.

Og sighed and lowered his branch. "And where does this lead us? I ask again: even if Zook's right, what can we do about it? Forget it all, just like that?"

Zook cleared his throat. "That's right," he said. "What Bert was talking about — that's the answer. At night we hear the murmurs of the Ones Before. We remember." He shrugged. "Maybe it's because at night we are tired from the day, and we let go a bit of our thinking and talking, and the Before comes back. Only it never really was gone. It's as if thinking is a loud new voice in a cave full of voices, and if you can just get the thinking voice outside the cave you can hear all the other voices."

Zook scanned the others. Their dark eyes were bright in the firelight as they looked into an inner distance. "They make you want to go back to the Before," he said. "Don't they?"

A female (who had no name because the thought of giving names to females had not yet occurred to anybody) said, "They ... call. And a part of me wants to go back. But a bigger part of me doesn't."

"That is the thinking part of you," explained Zook. "The loudest voice in the cave. But I've learned that if you listen to the other voices at night, they become louder. And in the day I have tried to . . . to move and be as I remember moving and being Before. The more I do this, the more the loud voice fades. It isn't something you can think about. Thinking . . . is a muscle that relaxes when you don't use it."

Bert raised a hand, frowning. "You mean," he began, "we think . . . about not thinking . . . when the way to not think . . . is to not think . . . about thinking?"

Zook frowned and narrowed his eyes. "I think so," he replied.

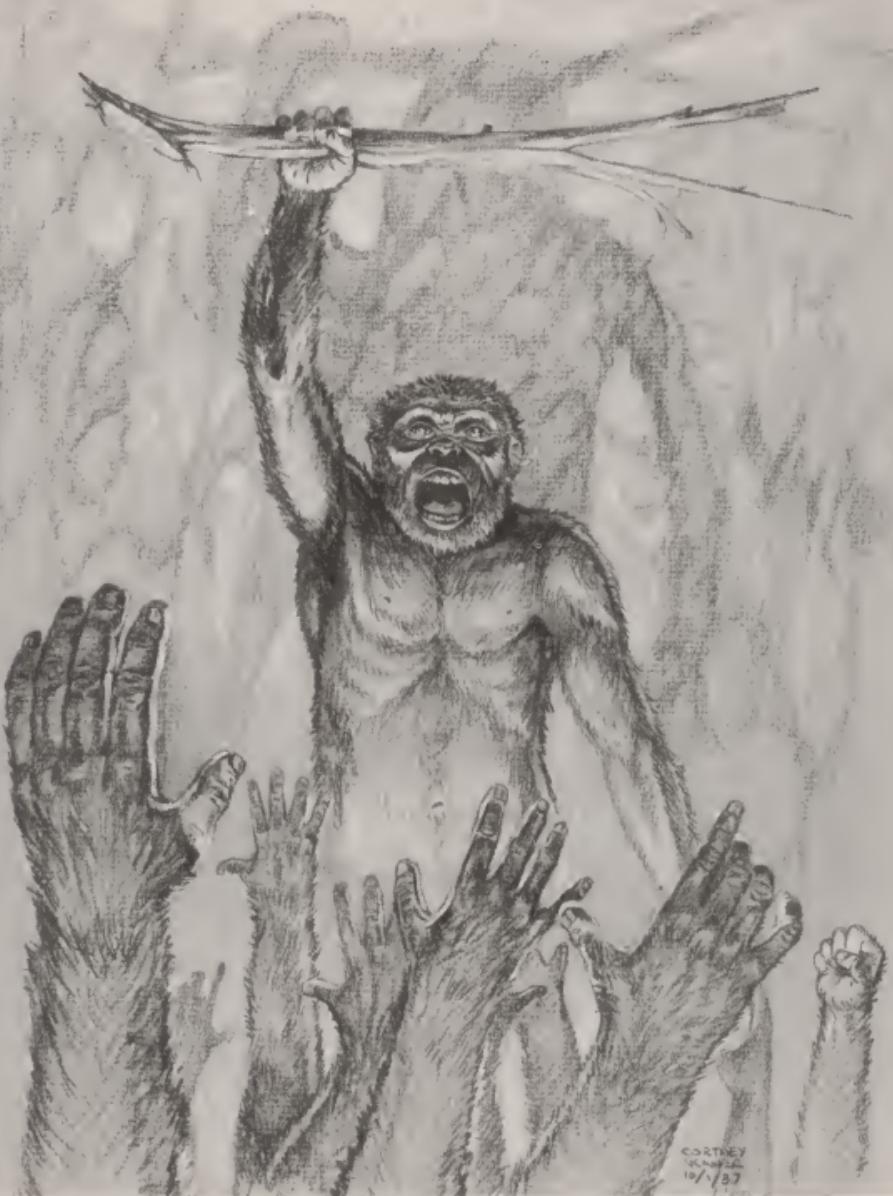
Crug the Flint-Chipper banged his marginal forehead against the stony floor. "My head," he moaned. "My head!"

Zook ignored him. "The pull to go back was so strong," he said. "But I wanted to be able to come talk to you tonight, so I fought it. It isn't easy to choose; there's a lot to be said for thinking, even though I think — See! — See! — I think it's too dangerous and too appealing."

Og waited until the cave quieted. "It seems to me," he countered, "that thinking means that we are aware of what we do. Are we all agreed on that?"

They were.

(Continued to page 46)



Containment

By Dean Whitlock

Art by Charles J. Lang

Lt. Robert Malcolm leaned against the railing and gazed out at the woods beyond the compound. They were a good half-klick away, but the day was cool and bright. The new leaves showed electric green in the clear air. Malcolm took a deep breath. A light breeze carried the smell of growing things. After months spent mostly underground, the fresh living spring was like a reprieve.

He let his eyes wander over the compound, noting the high fresh grass, a spot of white wildflowers, a bird on a high perch. The perch was surrounded by a chain-link fence and barbed wire, but he didn't notice them. They were normal, part of the winter past, part of this tour of duty. Malcolm stretched and turned his face up to the warming sun. It was a good day to be out, a day to rediscover the woods and the world around them.

His gaze went back to the woods, beyond the fences and the open ground. He smiled and his blue eyes flashed in the sunlight. He felt the lure, the call to hunt and explore, and he remembered days spent with his friends, fighting play armies in the woods like these. He couldn't answer their call now, but it was nice to know that he could still hear it.

Malcolm smiled, thinking back to other, younger spring mornings. He remembered lurking behind brambles in old cellar holes, a broken plastic rifle in his hands, waiting for his friends the enemy to try to find him. That was their usual game — the hunter and the hunted, the hider and the trapped. And he had usually won, because he could hide deeper and wait better than Willy or George or any other kid in the woods. He remembered their faces falling when time and again he caught them. Malcolm's smile broadened.

He brought his attention back to the compound. He had a clear view of ninety percent of the enclosure. The cooling tower was nine stories high and gave good vantage when the weather was fair. And the compound was kept clear of undergrowth. He could see all of the perimeter except for two short sections. There his view was blocked by the second tower, standing to the east, and the dome of the core-containment building, to the north. He walked around the rim of the tower, giving everything a dutiful glance, and came back to his original vantage. Malcolm

breathed in another great sigh of fresh air and looked out to the woods. It was a fine day.

He let his mind wander. He could afford to. Visual surveillance was only a small part of his duty as watchdog on the power plant. The perimeter was guarded by heat and pressure sensors buried in the ground and mounted on the fence. The entrances to the compound and to the building were watched by video monitors. The skies above were swept by radar from the second cooling tower. Malcolm's primary duty was to the electronic eyes. They sent information to a master panel in a bunker buried somewhere under the plant — even Malcolm wasn't sure exactly where. Its only access was from this tower through a pneumatic shuttle, and he spent most of his time there. When he went outside, he carried a radio link to the comm panel and earplug alarm.

The plant had been mothballed fifty years ago, after thirty years on line. They had damped the core and removed as much of the spent fuel as the military needed. But it cost too much to totally decommission a plant, and by then there was no better place to stash the wastes than right there in the dome. They sealed up the on-site storage facilities, kept the water flowing through the core, and stripped out everything else they wanted. Then they moved in the usual Guard platoon to watch over the plant till the hottest waste could be removed or had decayed to a safe level.

As the technology of watching improved, the platoon shrunk to five men. Then two. Then one. Lt. Bob Malcolm.

He smiled into the middle distance between the tower and the woods. It could be lonely duty, but he liked it. He had time to think, small maintenance jobs to keep his hands active, moments of pleasant chatter with the command center over the radio. And he wasn't completely alone. He had two K-9s, big, beautiful German shepherds who prowled the compound while he kept a distant watch with his sensors. He didn't mind the waiting at all.

Nor the end of waiting.

The moment came with a tiny peep in his ear. Without thinking, he dropped to one knee below the level of the railing and pulled the portable comm out of its pouch. The three-number readout sent a shock of anxiety through him. The



code indicated a perimeter break in the east quadrant, in one of the blind spots. He risked a look over the railing, but it was no good. The east tower blocked his view. He punched for extended data, and his anxiety turned to anticipation. The sensors indicated more than one body. It could be a herd of deer, he reminded himself.

And it could be men.

He scrambled to the chute and dropped down into the shuttle. A hatch closed above him and a blast of air carried him down to the bunker. He pulled himself out of the capsule and took his seat at the main comm. The center screen showed a map of the compound, and a red light glowed in the east quadrant of open ground. It moved slowly toward the fence. Malcolm switched to radar scan, and the red light became three lights. They were moving together, one ahead and two behind. He had no visuals that far out, and the radar wasn't sensitive enough to draw a silhouette. But he had the dogs. A switch released his lead animal, and as the dog came out into the compound, he became a blue light on the map. Malcolm gave him directions through a radio/tickler in his collar, and the dog moved southeast in a circling maneuver.

The enclosure was landscaped with long, low mounds that gave the dogs protection, and they were well-trained. The lights converged toward a spot at the perimeter fence, and the intruders stopped together, fused into a single blood-red glow. The dog stopped about fifty meters away. The animal was trained to observe and report by pawing his collar, and Malcolm stared at the screen, waiting for a signal. When it came, he almost laughed aloud. Three zeros. Men.

Man had gotten two useful commodities from nukes before the plants had become obsolete — power and plutonium. Electricity and weaponry. And despite the doomsayers, the price had been small, numbered in hundreds of lives, not millions. The track record had been good, particularly compared with other forms of power generation. Now the nukes were shut down and the wastes safely stashed underground, cast into space, or closely watched in the old plants. And the watching had not been that difficult. In the first years, there had been firefights at three stations. Once terrorists had actually stolen some low-level wastes, but they had been trapped in the streets of the town surrounding the plant and wiped out by the Guard. Very few civilians had been killed or contaminated.

The area around the plants had been cleared, the people moved to other homes, and the towns turned into nature preserves. And the Guard had developed a way to deal with intruders.

The red lights reached the fence and, after a minute's hesitation, went past it. Malcolm sent a command to his dog to follow and keyed a radio contact with the area command center.

"Central, this is Hector Station," he said. "I have a break-in here."

"Reading," came the reply. Malcolm smiled. The voice was calm and pleasant. Mitchell was on duty, and she was a good one to have on the other end. She was a career soldier, a non-

com with 15 years service, and she had been in on two break-in attempts. Malcolm had met her only once. She was older, approaching 40, and built like an early 20th century matron. But she knew her job, and she had a voice that made men dream.

"Deviation?" Mitchell asked.

"Negative. Key Central for standby."

The red light moved away from the fence toward the center of the compound and split back into three intruders, one leading and two behind. The blue light followed at a distance.

Malcolm keyed a blow-up of the east quadrant. The map was overlaid with a grid showing the contours of the enclosure. A series of ridges funneled from the perimeter away from the containment and storage buildings toward the east tower. The shape of the land looked natural. The hills were low and provided minimal cover, but they served their purpose. The light moved toward the tower. Malcolm relaxed a little.

"Funnel procedure underway," he reported.

"Reading," Mitchell replied. "Do you have verification on the intruders?"

"Visual sightings by K-9 unit indicate humans," Malcolm replied.

"Intention?"

"Unknown."

"Roger. Verify at first possible video."

"Will do." Malcolm watched the map, smiling. The dialogue went exactly by formula. They were being recorded and the recording would show that the plan worked. As it always had. In 20 years, there had been as many intrusions, and they had all failed. This was the first attack at Hector Station, the first non-drill attempt in Malcolm's three years with the Guard. The excitement he felt was almost sexual.

The light moved toward the tower, and Malcolm checked out the video. A second screen above his seat came to life, and he had a view of the side of the cooling tower curving into view on the left, and a section of the compound on the right. He punched a code and a door opened in the side of the tower. He checked the map. A green light marked the position of the door. The red lights came closer, and he watched the screen. They would come into view from behind the camera, to the right.

The screen went blank.

Malcolm stared at the gray fuzz and almost cursed, but he remembered the tape recorder and kept silent. Instead, he initiated a quick remote search for a fault in the circuitry. The video had two back-ups and neither had come on. The console itself had a repair program to spot malfunctions, and that had not come on. He keyed the program himself, but it came up negative.

He checked the main screen. The green light was still bright and the intruders were within ten feet of the open door. He ran through the repair program a second time, but found nothing. Reluctantly, he keyed the mike.

"Central, this is Hector. I have lost visuals, primary and back-up. Must assume a hostile intent on the part of the intruding force."

There was silence for a moment, then Mitchell spoke out in surprise.

"Did they blow the camera?" she asked. Malcolm winced. He hadn't expected her to lose her calm.

"Unknown, Central," he replied, stressing the title.

"Have you checked the other cameras, Hector?" she asked, and the stress that she laid on the name was angry. He winced again because he hadn't but when he checked the camera inside the door, it was dead. He randomly tried others in the building, but they were all useless. Somehow, the whole system had been blown.

"All visuals are nonfunctional," he said.

"Have you tried the repair mode?"

"Yes," he snapped, and was rewarded with a short pause.

"Where are they now?" she asked finally. He checked the screen. The red lights had converged to a single large glow that overlapped the side of the tower and faded the green of the doorway. Then the light split in two, moving away from the tower. He scanned for the third red dot and found it out in the grid, within touching distance of the blue point that was his dog. His eyes flashed to the animal's readout and found a last message, missed in the confusion of the blown video.

It read "Armed."

He looked back to the screen and saw the red light move back to its comrades. The blue dot blinked out.

"Central," Malcolm clenched his hands on the console and kept his voice steady. "Confirm hostile intent of intruders. My lead K-9 unit has been nullified."

There was another silence, and when Mitchell answered, her voice was steady and businesslike.

"Reading, Hector," she said quietly. "Do you request a back-up squad?"

He stared at the screen, willing the dots to move back toward the door. And they did. He relaxed his hands.

"Negative," he said.

The light paused by the door and then went through, one leading, the other two behind in a single blob of red. The comm automatically keyed the door and Malcolm smiled. He imagined it swinging shut behind the enemy, leaving them trapped in darkness with a third of a meter of steel blocking their only way out. The green light faded off the screen.

"Funnel procedure is completed," he said. "Initiating containment."

Then he punched a code to override automatic control of the program. It was his operation.

He keyed the screen, and it shifted to a map of the corridors beneath the east tower and the core building. The intruders glowed as a single bright dot at the edge of the maze. Another key opened a door before them, a door into a lighted hallway. The red light split. Part of it moved through the doorway. After a pause, the rest followed, and the lights joined into one and moved down the hall. Malcolm's hands ran over the keyboard and the picture enlarged slightly, but the screen showed only a single light to mark the intruders.

(Continued to next page)

Einstein's Cold Equation Blues

By David Lunde

*It used to be so easy
blasting into space:
my home-built backyard rocket
would take me anywhere.*

*The Stars My Destination,
Non-Stop off I'd go
until I made First Contact
out in Scorpio.*

*At the thunder of my landing,
Who Goes There? you would say
(All You Zombies wondering
how you got that way!)*

*I'd Skylark off to Vega
cruising at Tau Zero
and outsmart bug-eyed monsters,
a More Than Human hero.*

*Out Around Far Rigel
on a lazy day I'd roam,
'til I finally Lensed your message
through stars like drifting foam:*

*The Lights In The Sky Are Stars
but always Earth Abides
Earthman Come Home,
it's time to choose up sides.*

*No Runaround or Reason
would keep me from my quest,
as I put the stuff of mankind
to every Alien test.*

*But the planoforming soul
of The Man Who Wanted Stars
will never get much farther
than the not-Barsoom of Mars,*

*for Einstein's Cold Equation,
E equals MC squared,
has caused our Childhood's End,
and none of us is spared.*

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"Damn," Malcolm said it aloud this time, without thinking.

"What's the matter?" Mitchell asked.

"No problem, Central," he replied. "My maximum resolution won't separate individuals in a group."

"Is it related to your video problem?" she asked, and he thought he heard her voice brighten.

"Negative. The two systems are independent." There was irritation in his voice and she heard it.

"I am aware of that, Hector," she said coolly, "but you have yet to confirm the identity of the intruders or the cause of the video failure."

"Their intention is clear, Sergeant," he said slowly. "They have passed the first room and are proceeding as planned in corridor E-5."

"Very good, Sir," she replied, and her voice was clipped and distant. "Do you request a back-up squad?"

Malcolm bit off an angry retort. He had pulled rank, and she was making sure he knew exactly how much of the responsibility was his — all of it.

"Negative," he said, and the tension started to leave him. He watched the light on the screen, moving slowly down the corridor. He had trained for this situation, dreamed about this moment. He wanted no back-up squad.

He keyed the comm, and the door between the first room and the hallway closed. Another code opened a third door in a side wall ahead of them.

It was a simple plan — beautiful in its simplicity. They would turn a corner and find the corridor dark ahead of them. To their left or right would be a door leading to a lighted room. Or another lighted corridor. Or a corridor with a light shining out of another door farther on. The maze twisted and turned, leading them away from the control rooms, away from the on-site storage facilities, away from anything they could use or sabotage.

If they tried to turn back, they would find themselves in a different corridor, with another open door to lead them on. If they tried to stop, the lights would flicker and fade and then die, as if the plant were naturally suffering from its years of disuse. If they still refused to move, a squad would go in and bring them out — after a few weeks.

Malcolm admired the plan. But it also disappointed him. The screen was too distant and too dry. The video cameras were spaced too far apart — and not even working, he remembered with a brief flash of anger. He followed the single light — occasionally two — moving through the maze and tried to imagine the faces. Were they men or women, Americans or aliens? Did they know they were being led to a cage? Would their faces show it? He tried to imagine the half-lit corridors, the surprise of an open door at odd turnings, the growing confusion and tension.

He reported the stages of the containment procedure and keyed each change in the path as it came up. Mitchell kept her replies to brief acknowledgments. He took the time to check the

repair program and its back-up, but neither showed a fault in the video circuit. And he avoided checking for another reading from the K-9. There were back-ups built into the collar. He knew it would be dead.

The intruders stopped at one turning. The leader moved off, but a second light stayed behind and he came back. After ten minutes in darkness, they moved on.

Once, a door refused to close, and a check of the readouts indicated that it had been jammed. Malcolm smiled and activated a back-up system for the door. The servomotors had enough force to shear an eight-millimeter iron bar with the edge of the door. It closed.

Finally, they were at the center of the maze. Malcolm keyed open the door and watched the light move toward the final room — the core-containment chamber. It was a useless shell now. The cooling fluid trickled slowly over the last of the spent fuel in the well. Its faint turquoise luminescence reflected dimly in the high arch of the concrete dome. That was all that remained of its power. But it was enough.

The light moved in and hung by the entrance. A code flashed on the bottom of the screen, and Malcolm smiled again. They were inside. He closed the door behind them and watched the light, waiting, imagining.

It was a short wait. Another light flashed on the screen, and the containment procedure was over. Malcolm initiated the retrieval phase. The green light at the entrance flicked on and, after a brief pause, the intruders went through the door in a rush. Malcolm shook his head, almost pitying the poor fools. They had no choice but to run. The opening door keyed a blast of subsonics that would drive out even the deaf.

That was the ultimate simplicity of the plan. The victims were brought out of the chamber on their own feet, and none of the Guard had to go in after them. They were led to an exit on the side of the containment building, and, if the computer figured their time in the dome correctly, they would all make it right up to the door. After a few hours' wait, they could be brought out safely, sick and dying or dead.

Malcolm watched the light hurry toward the exit. It split, and one-half fell behind, then stopped. He frowned, because it would mean going inside to bring out bodies. Still, he couldn't help admiring the plan. And he couldn't help being disappointed.

"Central, this is Hector," he said to the mike. "Retrieval procedure has been completed." Mitchell was silent.

Malcolm stared at the console, suddenly aware of the quiet and the let-down building inside him. Suddenly, he keyed the mike again.

"Central, I am going outside," he said.

"Of course, Sir," Mitchell said, her voice thin over the speaker. "Do you request a clean-up squad?"

For me or them? Malcolm thought, angry at the insinuation in her voice.

"I'm going to check on the video and the K-9," he said sharply, and then wondered why he felt he had to explain himself.

"Of course, Sir." Her voice was unchanged.



He tried to ignore it and donned his protective clothing. The suit was fairly lightweight because he wasn't expected to go near the core, but it had built-in radiation detectors, a radio in the headpiece, and a pistol strapped to the waist. He checked that carefully because it was the only part of the system without a back-up.

He was supposed to wait for the clean-up squad before venturing outside, but the decision to stay or to go was ultimately his. He had to go.

The camera was intact. He took a close look at it on its mount in the side of the tower and could find no sign of tampering. He checked around the base of the tower and found no jamming devices. Finally, he shrugged it off. It was a mystery for the technicians.

Then he looked for the dog. After five minutes of searching through the molded terrain where he thought the animal should be, he began to hope that it might have lived. But then he found the collar. It had been unclasped and tossed into the grass. When Malcolm picked it up, it sensed his heartbeat and reactivated itself.

Malcolm stood still in the middle of the compound and stared out toward the trees beyond the fence. The day had gone from early morning to late afternoon while the progress had relentlessly played itself out. The sun was low

and distant, the air colder. He went to the exit door and stood listening, knowing that he would hear nothing. Finally, he tongued the radio in his helmet.

"Central," he said. "I am going to open the release door." There was a pause.

"Repeat, Hector," Mitchell was still on duty, and she sounded surprised.

"I'm going inside."

"Don't be crazy, Bob," she said, dropping all pretense of formality. "What if they're still alive?"

He didn't answer. He keyed in the sequence to open the door.

"Damn it, Malcolm," Mitchell yelled. "Can't you wait till they're dead?"

The door swung open and he stepped up to the threshold. The dog lay at his feet, its fur matted with vomit and blood.

"Jesus," Malcolm whispered.

"What's the matter?" Mitchell asked, her anger buried by anxiety.

Malcolm stared at the hand clenched in the dog's fur, at the plastic rifle in the mess on the floor, at the wasted face of the intruder.

"It's a boy," he said. "Just a little boy."

"Again?" she said quietly.

Search and Destroy

(Continued from page 15)

Hawkes's countermeasures were already busy. Little jumping-jack firecrackers sputtered around the woods, far out on the perimeter, trying to catch the parafoil's attention with heat, light, sound or motion.

It didn't seem to be looking for any of those things. It whirled steadily, slowly downward. Good old God, Gamble prayed, for the sake of my dear wife Doris, let the God-damned thing be an IFF sniffer ...

Perhaps it was.

It took forever to settle on its filmy wings, but it had no propulsion source of its own. It could only fall, slow or fast, from where the parafoil launcher had dropped it; and at last it had squeezed out the last moment of flight it could manage, aimlessly, seeking and not finding.

It touched ground in the middle of the field.

It went off with a hell of a blast, as its last-resort fuze did the only thing left to it to do and set it off. Dirt, stalks and spiky green leaves flew in all directions, but no member of Assault Team Bravo was within the damage sphere.

Belatedly Gamble realized the battle had changed character; there was less heavy stuff, more small-arms fire and yelling, all up and down the line.

Halversen's yell came then, too, and all that was left of Assault Team Bravo got up and moved in, fast and dirty, spraying everything ahead of them with everything they had.

There did not seem to be anybody firing back any more.

In the dimming light from fires and flares Gamble saw, as he ran, dead creeps staring vacantly up at him and wounded creeps cursing hopelessly at him, but of alive and well creeps pointing weapons at him there weren't any anymore.

The last of the creep farmers were gathered well outside of the ruin of their farmhouse, silhouetted in the light as it burned from a dozen mortar rounds. Their hands were up. Their weapons were on the ground. And it was all over.

The morning sun rose on a living Gamble, and one who was not even scratched. It occurred to him to say, "Thanks, God." Then it occurred to him it would maybe make more sense to say, "Thanks, Halversen, for the dope," and that made him grin until he forgot it.

It was easy to grin that morning. Just being alive was reason enough.

It was the assault teams who took the position and rounded up the prisoners, but it was the big-bellied senior agents from the rear who came in to handcuff the survivors, load the wounded into ambulance helicopters and read all of them their rights.

Not everybody on Bravo had come off as well as Gamble. Coglio was dead. MacReady had fallen almost onto a flashbang; he was unconscious, and that was probably a good thing, because his whole face was burned to blisters. Hawkes, the counter-measures man, had run as fast as he could from his jumping-jack firecrackers, but he hadn't run far enough, or

maybe had just been unlucky. Gamble helped lift him into an ambulance, and he had no uniform blouse at all on his right side any more. He almost had no right side, because it had been eaten away by some creep's rapid-fire weapon.

But except for things like that, it was a peaceful morning in the Oregon woods.

There was smoke from a hundred little fires in the forest, but companies of Forest Rangers were already putting them out. There was noise from the helicopter rotors churning away, and deeper, more businesslike noises from the John Deeres that were grunting through the job of plowing under the marijuana fields.

That was bad news. Gamble hadn't expected them there quite so fast. He had spent time helping with the wounded that he could have been using for himself.

Like everyone else on the teams, his first objective now was to beat the plows to the crop. The plows were already working on one end of the biggest, ripest field, and at others assault-team members were emptying their ammunition pouches, looking for the biggest, healthiest stalks, stripping off the leaves, cramming them into the pouches. Rounds of every known kind of ammunition were strewn all over the field, until Halversen came roaring by and made them stop. "Stupid effers," he bawled, "you want to blow up some civilians? If one of those effing plows hits a effing live round with a contact fuze we're all in the deep crap forever!"

Grudgingly the teams began to retrace their steps to collect the ammunition and dump it in safe stacks under trees. When Gamble had done what he thought was enough to be his share, he too walked into the forest, sat with his back leaning against a tree and lighted up a joint from his private stock.

Halversen came slowly by.

You weren't supposed to smoke dope once the action was over. Halversen glared. Then he shrugged. He didn't say anything, but he slumped down on the next tree to Gamble and lit a joint of his own.

They sat silent for a moment, waiting for some reason to do anything else. None came.

At last Gamble offered, "That was good about the dope. I guess that parafoil was sniffing for it, right, identification friend-or-foe? And we must have smelled just like one of its own people."

"It worked for them that did it," said Halversen wearily. "You know Teasdale, the straight-arrow from Dog?"

"Team leader. Sure. He used to be a running back at Cornell before he joined up."

"Well, he didn't run fast enough. Parafoil came in and aced the whole team."

"Way it goes," said Gamble philosophically. "Well, the creeps'll figure that out next time, anyway. It won't work twice."

Halversen took a deep hit. He said, his voice strained and squeaky as he let the smoke out, "It won't matter to you and me, anyway."

Gamble felt a quick uneasy shudder. He sat up. "Oh? Why's that, Halversen?"

"Because good old Bravo's going to good old Colorado."

"Colorado?" Gamble screamed. "What the eff do

you mean, Colorado? You told me yourself we were going to get occupation duty right here in Oregon, guarding the fields until the marijuana rots in the earth and the farmers can't come back and scavenge it!"

"They told me myself it's going to be Colorado. We're assigned to the cocaine business, bro. Up and down the mountains, looking for the high-altitude coca farms and the paste factories."

"Oh, crap," Gamble moaned, hugging his knees.

He rocked back and forth in misery. "They never told me drug enforcement was going to be like this. My Goddammed father-in-law's right, I might just as well have joined the effing Army!"

Halversen flicked the coal off the tiny stump of his joint, peeled the paper off, chewed and swallowed the contents. He grinned at Gamble. "What are you, a pacifist?" he asked.

— ABO —

Editor's Notes

(Continued from page 3)

Others asked about lifetime subscriptions (which we don't offer yet).

The real test came when we finally mailed our first official renewal notice. This would tell us if those who had first subscribed liked it enough to renew or were just too busy to cancel.

The response exceeded our expectations and we knew then we would have a strong enough following to warrant at least adding a slick cover to the magazine — and that's where some funny numbers began showing up.

It turned out that it would cost just as much to add a slick cover as it would to print the entire magazine slick with what's called a "self cover," which simply means that the cover is printed on the same paper stock as the interior on the same printing press and at the same time.

We decided to go all the way and printed the first full-slick in January 1988. Curiously enough, even though the field has always been full of excellent illustrators, *ABO* made history of sorts. It was the first full-color, full-slick science fiction magazine ever published. A few others had tried slick before, but never with full-color interior art.

Suddenly, for those who only look at covers, form and substance had merged.

ABO had come into its own. It was now unquestionably the most attractive science fiction magazine being published, and one of the liveliest.

ABO is now officially a prozine, as our circulation went over the 10,000 mark for all nine issues with the publication of our March/April 1988 issue.

And the words "Hugo Award Nominee" do look nice on the cover.

Almost as nice as "Hugo winner" might look....

— ABO —

A Long Time Ago ...

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, writers such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner and more.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors: Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, Alan Dean Foster, Connie Willis, John Kessel, Kevin O'Donnell Jr., D.C. Poyer, M. Lucie Chin, Joe L. Hensley & Gene DeWeese, John A. Taylor, Gregor Hartmann, and Eugene Potter.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

To order, send \$11 for each copy to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, Book Dept., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.



Regeneration

By Rory Harper

Art by Ron Lindahn

Cascades of elongated diamonds sleeted past him in the darkness, passing like multi-colored knives through his insubstantial body. The knives met Levi every time he went back, and he always cringed away from them, though they didn't cut and tear him as they should. For the past year he'd had nightmares about knives, often sweatily waking in the smothering blackness of his bed, wrapped in the winding sheets and blankets, desperately curled into a tight, protective foetal ball.

The old man looked around blearily when Levi popped into existence next to the door behind him. The room looked exactly as it had the last time Levi was in it. It held a bed, a table and one chair, a cheap veneer dresser, and his father, bottle and glass before him. Nothing else. The deluxe suite in a wino hotel.

"Hi, Pop, long time no see," Levi said. He walked over and stood loosely in front of the old man, the rickety dinette table separating them. The old man looked at Levi's gold tie-clip.

"Where'd you come from, boy? I figured you'd probably be over in Viet Nam about now." He pronounced it Veet Nayyum. "You desert or something?"

"No, Pop, been there and back already." He touched the gun snuggled in his pocket. As always, it felt warm to the touch. Alive. Some kind of eddy current induced by the field?

"How'd you find me?"

"Wasn't easy." The old man stared at him. Levi smiled. "I can only stay a few minutes. Then I gotta go back. It's the power requirements," he said apologetically.

The old man leaned back in his chair, the drink held tight in one knotty fist. "Never thought I'd see you again. You joined the service as soon as you was old enough and walked out the door cussing me up one side and down the other."

Levi shrugged. "Changed my mind. Brought you a present." He pulled the gun into view. The

shadows of age settled more firmly on the old man's face, but the drink held steady as he brought it up to cracked lips.

"You come to kill me. Huh. You ain't got the guts. You always was a yella little punk."

"You ought to know how much guts I had. You tried to beat them out of me often enough."

"You damn well deserved it every time I put a hand to you!"

"Right. How about when you tied me up and laid into me with an extension cord? Or strapped me to the furnace in the basement and kept me there until I messed all over myself? Or the cigarette burns. I deserved those, too?" The old man looked away, out the grimy window. Not much of a view. A filthy brick wall a few feet outside. "You remember the last time I came to visit you here, Pop?"

The old man's head snapped back around. "I ain't seen you for almost three years, since back in St. Louis."

"I come to see you about once a month, done it a couple dozen times. And you never remember."

"You full of crap, boy."

"No, Pop. You got stabbed to death in a vacant lot before I could find you and kill you myself. But now I have something almost as good. I can travel back in time and kill you whenever I want to."

"Viet Nam done made you go crazy. I seen on the teevee what it done to lots of boys."

"Look at my face. You haven't done that yet. How old am I, Pop?" The old man looked up, then drew back. If the glass had still contained anything, it would have spilled. "Yeah. I've aged pretty well, I think. Fifteen years." The old man didn't say anything, so Levi continued. "You can't remember my visits. What happens here goes into what I call a time pocket. When I leave, everything goes back to the way it was before, as if I'd never been here. It takes an enormous amount of power to alter reality for even this



short time. Coming back and killing you is expensive. But it's worth every dollar, Pop. Mind if I have a drink?"

The old man watched silently as Levi picked the bottle up and took a swig, then held it out mockingly. After a moment, he put out his glass to be refilled.

"Once, when I came back, you were sitting naked on the bed, and I saw the scars on your back for the first time. Did you always deliberately hide them from me? They look a lot like the ones I can see on my own back if I twist around in front of a mirror. They say it travels in families, Pop, yea, even unto the seventh generation."

Abruptly, Levi's face crumpled, the mocking tone vanishing from his voice. He dropped the bottle to the table, where it rocked unsteadily on its base. "Damn, why didn't you ever talk to me about it? Maybe we could have changed things if..."

The old man laughed, the sound flat and dead in the small room. "Real sorry for yourself, ain't you? Well, the hell with you. You still ain't nothing but a whining little punk. Go on, get out of here, you crazy boy. You ain't going to do nothing with that gun, and I got some serious drinking to do tonight." He emptied his glass with one gulp and reached for the bottle.

"Pop, I wish..."

"You deaf or something, boy? I said get out of here and don't come back!" The old man lurched to his feet and grabbed for the gun.

Levi pulled the trigger. He'd been drilled countless times in the Army to squeeze, not jerk, and his shaking hand did it automatically. The heavy forty-five roared and twisted once. The old man's body slammed backwards and crashed to the floor, the top of his head torn off by the massive slug. He twitched jerkily, his mouth opening and closing as if still slurring imprecations.

Levi stepped around the table and stared down at the body. First time he'd used a forty-five. It did the same thing to Pop that it used to do to the gooks they caught.

A lifetime of wanting to kill him, and when he finally could, over and over, it was never enough. Maybe because the old man never, not once, got down on his knees and begged, never backed up an inch.

Maybe because he never gave Levi anything but his hate.

"I wish you'd quit hurting me, Pop. Maybe then I could quit killing you."

The smell of the blood and his father's released sphincter began to nauseate him in the tiny, already sour room. Almost imperceptibly,

the gun in his hand cooled.

The slackness in the body slipped away, the muscles jumping with the returning currents of life. The old man opened blind eyes, staring at the ceiling as his head began to reassemble. It flowed and solidified as blood and slime from the floor joined it in an obscene swirling dance. The unbroken glass rolled back into his clutching hand.

His body and the chair levitated upright, going through Levi, who shied away, too late. Should have known that would happen. Things always went back to however they had been before. He turned and saw the old man from behind as he poured another drink from the bottle.

He lifted the pistol and fired another round into the back of his father's head, but the sound was a brief whisper, the flash a pale glimmer. The old man ignored it.

The room faded, the diamonds growing more saturated with color as everything else washed out.

The machine in the corner of the basement flared up once and died in a shower of sparks. Damn core burnt out again. Last time it did that, about six trips back, he started to fade out after only a few seconds with Pop. Luckily, he'd noticed and put a slug into the old man's belly before he became too wraithlike. The cores took a week to hand-wind, in precisely the correct way.

He pulled his jacket off and took a shop smock from the peg next to the assembly bench. Might as well pull the core now. Going to be a long day tomorrow, what with the morning wedding rehearsal with Rachel, and the Feds at the Institute to start their yearly audit and review of his NSF grant. God forbid they ever discovered how far he'd progressed. Then they might find out about his visits and make him stop.

He picked up a crescent wrench and a small screw-driver from the bench and took a few steps toward the machine. From behind him came a quiet pop!, as if the floor had shifted and buckled. Unlikely in a solid concrete floor. He turned.

A young man stood about ten feet away, in his hand a small pistol-like device. The muzzle had no aperture, and it looked as if it were made of cheap plastic. It pointed directly at his midriff.

"Hi, Pop." A sad smile played about his lips.

"Who are you?"

"Jacob. Your son."

"I don't have a son."

"Surely you don't think you're the only one

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bright enough to stumble on the secret of the core and figure out what to do with it? A man named Jenkins will get the credit a year after you die without telling anyone about it. You're getting married to Mom next week, aren't you? That's what I came to congratulate you about. You're going to have a son later. We'll both regret it." Levi shuffled backwards a step. The young man wagged the gun and he stopped. "Ah, you already know why I'm really here, don't you?"

Levi looked beyond him to the bench on which rested the jacket containing the forty-five. No chance. "I haven't done anything to you."

"Haven't you? Can't you feel it inside, waiting to come out when it gets the chance?"

Levi licked his lips. "How many times is this?"

"Four. My therapist says I'm making great

progress, but I'll probably have to come back several more times before I achieve closure. We'll see."

"Funny kind of therapy."

"I come from a more advanced time. Anyway, isn't that what you're trying to do when you go back? Trying to exorcise your demons? You shouldn't take this personally. You're not real, you know. I couldn't do this if you were a real person, not the way I could, say, the first two times. I'm getting healthier."

Levi hesitated, then took a deep breath.

"Okay. I'm not real. Let's get it over with." At least he could go out as tough as the old man did. "You must need to return pretty soon."

Jacob smiled again. "No hurry. Like I said, I come from a more advanced time. My machine is hooked up to its own personal fusion reactor and I'm on summer vacation. I did better in

school this year. My therapist says that's a direct result of my therapeutic interaction with you last summer."

Jacob danced to one side and the screwdriver and crescent wrench whirled harmlessly past his head. The little gun clicked twice and Levi fell to the floor, spears of agony knotting his stomach, his desperate lunge aborted before he covered half the space between them. Gasping, he watched Jacob turn and put the gun down on the bench, then clumsily scrape back the hem of his coat with a hand that Levi saw to be scarred and twisted. The other hand reached inside the coat and removed a small blue case.

"See, Pop, that was your problem," Jacob said. "You couldn't stay back long enough to get the full catharsis you needed. To repay the debt in full, as it were. It was like trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon. But I've got as long as I need, and I'll be careful. I bet I can keep you alive for days."

He set the case on the bench and opened it. "My therapist taught me some practical anatomy. She tells me I have a delicate touch and the proper detached attitude necessary in a good surgeon. I might have considered med school next year if it weren't for this."

He held up his ruined left hand and gazed at it emotionlessly as three fingers twitched spasmodically. "Too much nerve damage. They can't give it back to me."

He walked over to Levi and squatted beside him. Levi weakly tried to scrabble away on the hard concrete floor but only managed to tear the skin and flesh on the palm of his right hand. "Tsk. Let's start there, since you've already hurt it a bit." He pinned Levi's wrist with his forearm, the one that ended in the useless hand. He gazed into Levi's mad eyes for a moment and the sad smile returned once again.

"Don't cry, Pop." He used the hand that held the knife to gently brush away the tears on Levi's face. "It'll be over eventually, and then you won't have to remember, you know that."

Levi's eyes swung again to the crippled hand.

"I really do that to you?" he managed, painfully.

"Yeah, Pop, you surely did."

"Sorry. Wish I could take it back. Wish a lot of things."

"Me too. Wish I didn't have to do this. I don't hate you anymore. I just need it to get well."

"Not your fault. Mine. Shouldn't have hurt you."

"It's okay. I understand how it travels through the generations and I really want to stop

it here. Help me, so your grandchildren can grow up happy."

His elbow eased its pressure and, after a moment, Levi stretched his hand out to him.

"Love you, son," Levi whispered.

"I love you too, Pop."

Then Jacob lovingly cut off the fingers on Levi's right hand, one by one, the tears streaming down his face to mingle with his father's blood.

-ABO-

Flashing the Black Long Streets

By Wendy Rathbone

Outer space slips through its boundaries and expands.

The magician thinks it is an aborted disappearing act, the comic, a joke that conveniently burst. Everyone has a theory.

The phenomenon echoes the Big Bang, scientists say, like entropy and the natural growth of all things.

It is God giving birth, the second coming.

So the evangelists ask for more money.

The survivalists know this is the end of the world. They ready ammunition, hoard water, canned peaches and little green peas.

Children cry that the nightmare has finally come to life.

The multi-legged creature drips a slimy path into their jumping hearts. But the bag lady

in her crazy honesty lives the simple truth.

It's just another day flashing the black, long streets struggling to survive one more hour, a minute to postpone

a too soon slippage through boundaries thin as skin.

-ABO-

Merchant Dying

(Continued from page 27)

Now he falls. The void is warm and comforting, its depths lit by fragments of broken glass that blur into stars. Or maybe they are just the after-images of the room lights, flickering as his neurons discharge.

Merchant is cremated, as he had requested. There is a memorial service, attended by some of Sara's friends, a group of scientists from the project, an official from NASA. A fine drizzle powders the dark umbrellas under which the group walks to its cars. They speak in low voices of Merchant's life, but no one has really known him well.

Sara thanks each of those who have attended the service, then drives back to the house. There is work to be done and it must begin immediately. Death is in the house, in the dust that has accumulated during the past three weeks while she virtually lived at the hospital, in the tenuous air. She must cleanse the Merchant house of death.

She begins her work at once and continues far past midnight. She dusts, she scrubs, ignoring her exhaustion. Her swollen eyes burn as she opens all the windows. Frantically, she seizes Merchant's picture and cleans the dust from it. But in the night death hides in the crevices despite all she does. She stands with the vacuum before the door of Merchant's closet, unable to move. Her hand is on the knob. Death lurks like a seething fume in his clothing.

Sara awakens on the floor next to the vacuum where she has fallen. The room is pale; the sun peers in through morning fog. The next three weeks begin as she stands stiffly, then walks to the sink to throw water in her face. They end with a ringing telephone.

Tullock peers into the circuit. He seems distracted; his eyes dance. He asks her to come to the Control Center. "Please," he says. "We all thought you should be in on this."

"Of course."

She breaks the connection, finds her keys, and backs the Buick out of the driveway. She moves down the same divided highway where Merchant had his accident. Shortly after Merchant's death, the probe switched on again. It is now on the outer edges of the planetary system around Epsilon Indi.

Sara's face is caught by the light of the street lamps as she passes under them. It is a face which age has hardened. The line of her jaw suggests resolve, but the eyes are wounded. The color of those eyes — a flinty blue gray — the way they seem to see through things, renders her more striking than beautiful. She seems to look into a place no one else can see.

She finds Tullock not outside where he had promised to meet her but, through corridors, in the wide control room. He is animated, his face bright red with excitement as he goes from console to console, peering over shoulders, slapping backs. There is a charged buzz of conversation and information, chirping telemetry, ringing telephones. Her eye is caught by the sea-green motion of the seconds changing on the

chronometer: 94:156:04:19:11...12...13...

There is an unfamiliar man at the console which Merchant occupied; Sara sees wavy brown hair, a dangled cigarette. But then Tullock sees her, crosses the floor in great strides, hugs her. The light changes as he does this. The giant screen at the center of the front wall becomes a huge star field, upon which are set in the foreground an incredibly bright star, and one very green disc, just large enough to show a crescent. There is a roar from the room, the wild clapping of hands, and Sara now sees that Tullock has lit a cigar. He hugs her again.

"That's from the main probe," he explains. "Eleven planets — that's the eighth, a gas giant. Probably the only one we'll see tonight."

But she knows all this. Merchant has described it to her often enough. The probe is at fourteen percent of the speed of light as it nears Epsilon Indi. It will cross the system in a matter of days, scattering smaller probes behind. Sara can hear him saying all this by candlelight in a Mexican restaurant a year before they married. She can see him hunched over the terminal, awash in the data stream.

"Eleven planets!" cries Tullock. "Can you believe it?"

But Sara does not seem to hear him. As a great cheer gusts from the crowd, she walks down the center ramp, halfway to the screen. It towers above her, throwing upon her skin the light of Epsilon Indi. All around her men are punching buttons, adjusting dials, talking into microphones. The telemetry from the probe comes on and on, a wave engulfing them all.

Tullock walks to her side; he leans close to her ear. "I wish Lee could have seen this," he says.

She does not respond. She is bathed in hot yellow light. The howling photon stream of Epsilon Indi is breaking against her face as the first of the smaller probes is jettisoned. As it lets go, she feels no longer human. She is the probe, scorching the vast arc of spacetime. She will plunge close enough to this star to feel its fire caress her silver cheek, then out, out, out, to what end she cannot conceive.

— ABO —

Last Meeting

(Continued from page 30)

"So being aware of what we do," he continued, "means we have to take the blame for what we do." He paused to let this sink in. "So for Zook to tell us to forget our thinking is to tell us to run away from the blame — or the credit — for what we do."

The assembly mulled it over, and Og smiled, knowing he had struck home.

"But right now," argued Zook, "our thinking, and the responsibility it carries, allows us to choose." He paused again while they quieted.

"Our intelligence becomes a more powerful thing every day," he continued. "We are growing dependent on it, and that may be our downfall. Who can know if

the thing that destroys us someday is a thing we ourselves think up?"

He scanned their sober, firelit faces. "Soon we may have no choice in the matter," he said. "The voices of the Ones Before will be gone, and only the loud voice will remain." He paused. "I can teach you how to ignore it," he said. He met Og's flinty eyes. "Perhaps choosing to get rid of our ability to choose is the best — and maybe the only — choice."

Crug covered his eyes with a stubby-fingered hand. "Dizzy!" he announced. "I am so dizzy!" He moaned.

"I have argued for what I feel, Zook," Og said formally, "and you have argued for what you feel. Let us ask for a show of hands, and those who raise their hands with you may be taught to go back to the Before. The rest of us —" he smiled wickedly — "will think about it some more."

Zook could almost hear Og adding to himself, *And rule well.* Still, he saw little alternative.

"Fair enough," he said.

Og turned to the group and ceremoniously banged his branch against the floor. "Fellow australopithecines," he said. "We have a motion on the floor to abandon our intelligence and our language as detriments to our survival as a species." He glanced at Zook. His eyes were stones. "Do I hear a second?" he asked.

A moment's silence while the Hunters and Gatherers and Makers and females looked among themselves.

"My hands ache all the time now," piped Bert. "I say we go back. Second!"

"Second!" said Kee.

"Second!" cried the Hunters.

"Third!" said Crug.

Og banged his branch. "All right, all right. The motion has been seconded. Could we have a show of hands in favor of this motion?" He counted the hands, then motioned for the tribesmen to lower them.

"Against?"

The vote was nearly unanimous, and the meeting adjourned — without another word.

Further meetings were canceled due to lack of interest.

(*The author would like to express his gratitude to David J. Schow for his assistance in the revision of this story.*)

— ABO —

Slushpile

(Continued from page 20)

slips!"

"Be patient!" she snapped. "You can't rush quality work!"

"Omgod," Phil gasped, his face ashen, "they're hatching."

"Gina!" Rex demanded. "I need those slips now!"

"Hold your horses. They're just about ready..."

*** * * *

Even with ten years' experience in hand-to-hand fiction editing, the fifteen minutes that followed were

the most ghastly Rex had ever lived through. Armed with the new rejection slips, he, Gina, and Phil waded into the heart of the beast, tearing open envelopes and slapping down tags. Gluing them to the manuscripts, to force retyping; in an odd way the process had a familiar feel, as if they were driving thousands of little stakes through thousands of tiny vampires' hearts.

It was a grisly job, but at last they were done. "It's harmless," Phil pronounced. "We destroyed its will to live."

Rex brushed aside a pile of spent glue sticks and collapsed into a chair. "Did we get it all? All?"

"Here's one we missed!" Gina called out, as she crouched on her hands and knees and peered under the receptionist's desk. She fished out the manuscript and read aloud, "It Came from the Slushpile, by some guy I've never heard of."

"Ugh!" Phil spat. "Sounds like a bad '50s sci-fi movie!"

"I don't know," Gina countered. "Listen to this: 'The place stank. A queer, mingled stench that only the —'"

"That's the opening of John Campbell's *Who Goes There?*," Rex said wearily. "At least he plagiarizes from a good source."

"So you don't want to read it?" Gina asked. Rex answered her with a sneer more eloquent than any words.

"Okay," Gina shrugged, as she dabbed some glue on a rejection slip and prepared to slap it down.

But then, she hesitated ...

— ABO —

Sing

(Continued from page 6)

even though I'm old now, I still wonder sometimes what it is about the *sing* that makes one soul freeze without freezing another. The only reason I can think of why Dirk didn't die when he murdered those two is maybe 'cause Dirk could hear the *sing*. And hearing the *sing* meant he didn't have a right and proper soul.

And me, sometimes in the time between twilight and darkness, I miss Dirk and his strange tubes. And I catch myself dreaming about what it would be like to have him turn his metal things toward me. After all, he did say he was going to do me different. I would of loved to see my soul.

But mostly, I just feel sorry for Dirk. He was stealing souls and keeping them in a box. You can't keep a soul in a box. You got to wear it proud, and it's got to be yours, not someone else's. I hope Dirk knows that now. And I hope he learned to use his tubes to block out the *sing*. Maybe that way his soul will come back, and he won't have to run away to strange places searching for it. But most of all, I wish that Dirk would come here so I could tell him I'm sorry. I shouldn't of run away after I screamed. I should of stayed and helped him find out what part of his soul he was missing. And I didn't.

I wonder if that means my song ain't light and innocent and warm no more. It bothers me that I ain't got no way to find out.

The Milk of Knowledge

By Ian Watson

Art By Bob Eggleton

"You can't go home again," said Thomas Wolfe, back in the Twentieth Century. You can't relive the past.

Wise words.

Unfortunately, wrong.

For the past *can* recapture you. I am forty-one years old. I ought to be living out in Celesteville, our European space colony at the L-4 libration point. Its existence means that we are safe at last. Safe. If the whole chaotic Planet Earth goes smash, at least Celesteville will survive — as will Skytopia over at the L-5 libration point.

But it isn't the year 2090 any longer. It's 2063 again, and here I am back on Earth in Greater Birmingham, Europa, in my dead parents' tower-slot. They're alive. I'm fourteen years old. Just as I used to be, once upon a time...

Twice upon a time, now! Time has looped back. My mind has fled back down my lifeline into younger flesh, dispossessing my fourteen-year-old self. I'm imprisoned in my own past.

Is this a miracle? Can there be horrible miracles as well as kindly ones?

Whatever could have happened in 2090 to cause this? I can only think that I died — so suddenly that I didn't even notice dying. I died, and was reborn. And who's to say that a person *must* be reincarnated later on in the future? Why not in the past, in his own past? Maybe the Sun exploded in a nova, and every single creature died, every host of souls, so that now there is only the past to be reborn in!

But according to the Infoscreen this world of AD 2063 scrapes along as ordinarily as ever. A few billion people have not suddenly woken up all over this pox-ridden globe — preincarnated, or deincarnated, or whatever one can call it. I dare not interrogate the Infoscreen in so many words about this possibility, though, or it would diagnose me as insane. I would be taken away for drug and shock treatment.

It seems I am unique in my predicament. So I shall keep quiet about my uniqueness for the moment.

My body image feels all wrong. I can still sense myself extending beyond my present feet, beyond my present hands: someone taller, slimmer, healthier. But I'm crushed into a short, tubby mass like somebody who has been stuffed into a suitcase.

I must remember how to be normal, here in 2063.

Milk for breakfast, today being Fourthday. (Oh the beautiful herds of Guernsey cows grazing on the meadows of Celesteville!) My Mum smiles caringly as she empties the pack of milk into my plastic beaker, shaking out every last drop. She realizes that I'm overweight. Many people are overweight. She is, too. But it isn't from any surfeit of riches. It's because we only get junk food most of the time. My Dad, exceptionally, has managed to stay slim by playing squash at the Leisuredome. My Mum and Dad will both be very slim at the end of next year, from endless diarrhoea, when the Epidemic of '64 arrives. Soon they'll be skeletons. (Mum, Dad: Dear strangers! How can I save you?) Dad keys in the early morning news on the Infoscreen. It's the Indonesian Crisis, all over again. ("Don't worry," I want to say. "It'll pass. We'll scrape through this one. Then the next one, then the one after. I'm afraid that you personally won't survive it. But I will. The world will — unlikely as that seems, right now in 2063.")

"Drink up, Johnny."

Mum microwaves some junk sausages. Offal and sawdust.

Obediently I drink...and taste something of the flavour of Celesteville. Not much, but something.

"A newflash just in from the Viennese Free State reports the assassination of Chancellor Karl-Heinz Kraus by Greater Europa extremists. Details follow. EuroGov Brussels entirely dissociates itself..."

"Oh God," says Dad softly. "Not him."

("It'll pass, Dad. I know it will.)

I drain my beaker.

Milk. Like...the milk of knowledge...

I came across the story in Celesteville once, when I was accessing at random through ancient literature. It was in the works of a Twelfth Century Arab philosopher, Ibn 'Arabi.

Once there was a man named Taqi ibn Mukhallad who experienced a dream-vision of the Prophet Mohammed, and in this dream the Prophet presented Taqi with a cup of milk to drink. Now, Taqi believed this to have been a true vision of the Prophet. But just to verify it, when he woke up the next morning he forced himself to vomit. He threw up enough fresh, sweet milk to fill a cup. But that milk signified knowledge. If Taqi had stopped to think more deeply about his dream, he would have realized this. By doing as he did he obtained a little physical proof, but he deprived



himself of a great knowledge — equal to what he had drunk...

Poor Taqi.

Shall I vomit up my own milk of knowledge? Shall I tell?

If I tell, surely I can change the world! I can show everyone the way through. I can save the cosmonauts who will crash on Mars. I can forewarn the world of the Epidemic of '64, and the *Beagle* crisis of '69, and the Tientsin reactor melt-down. I can warn of the Great Beast: Donna Marquez, the "Divine Marquise" of Peru. I can save a million martyrs from pain and death. I can save hundreds of millions of human beings from epidemic and catastrophe...

If I can forewarn, it will be difficult for a fourteen-year-old boy. The chances are that I would be shocked and drugged back into my senses — or, when my first prophecy came true, I would become the prisoner of EuroGov, the exploited oracle in a cage, the target of kidnapping and assassination.

And would I *really* change the world, as I imagine? Once I had changed one thing, wouldn't all future events change subtly as well? If I vomited up all the milk of my knowledge of twenty-seven years, how could that very future which I was trying to improve ever come into being? A paradox. The milk gone sour, in the udder.

When you come down to basics — if you can put aside the agonies of the coming years — survival is the main thing. And the world does survive. It scrapes through — till 2090, at any rate. That would seem enough of a miracle today. Celesteville. Skytopia. Might I not derail that future? If I wasn't simply taken away for therapy...

So I keep the milk down. I need a plan. But I can't think of one.

Come on, Taqi, help me out! If I'm a Time-Messiah, somebody should have told me *why*!

My own Screen chimes loudly, though in my bed-slot. It is five minutes till school-time. Though there are no schools as such, now that education is computerised.

There must be a reason. (Mustn't there?)

I'm powerless — with such power over the destiny of the world. And using my power might wash it all away. And how do I get to use it in the first place?

"Don't be late, Johnny."

But I am late. I'm twenty-seven years later than anybody else in this world.

"*Guten Morgen, Johnny!*" announces my Screen with a personalised impersonality. "*Heute wir...*" Today we begin with German.

Followed, I sincerely hope, by French. I speak these two Euro-tongues really fluently now. ("Now," being later on in time. Orphaned by the Epidemic, I will go to Ruhrstadt as a ward of EuroGov — and thence eventually I will blast off to the paradise of Celesteville. Once it has been conceived. Once it has been built.)

In fact, I speak French and German all too well. ODA — the Ongoing Diagnostic Assessment — compliments me on the sudden improvement in my accent and fluency. Then an hour later it suggests tartly that

I have been concentrating too much on languages at the expense of Biochemistry — at which suddenly I am a cretin. I try to keep my proficiency in Maths down to the expected level. But then, when it's time for French, it's hard to hobble my tongue. And ODA has a nose for these things. *ODA stinks*: kids used to aerosol that on the walls. I am praised, and warned again.

I will have to hobble my tongue — until I have a plan.

I was no swimmer then; but now I am.

The education rules insist that we scattered schoolboys come together for a communal splash at the Leisuredome, overseen by a doddering old supervisor and a hulking sadistic lifeguard. What a nightmare this used to be for me, what an ordeal of the fat flesh! All the crashing bodies, the pullings underwater, the strip-thefts of swim-gear. How many times was I the victim, running flabbily around with my balls bobbing, begging for my trunks while they were tossed from hand to hand? I used to think of suicide. My only chance of safety was to be the fat mascot of one of the school gangs — even if they frequently took it into their heads to play cruel games with their mascot. I had to clown it for them, tears in my eyes. But the tears looked like swimming pool water.

But this afternoon I cleave the chlorinated blue. I leap from the diving board. I sound like a whale. My mind remembers, and my body obeys. Needless to say, my untuned muscles will scream about it afterwards. Not yet, though. Not yet.

My gang stares, amazed.

I laugh.

"It's the triumph of the will!" The fools don't know what I'm talking about. Of course not.

This won't do, though. One petty triumph isn't enough.

Just to get things straight I start compiling a chart of the future. A future history.

Two wretched days later, I give up. The problem is insuperable. This would take me six months, and by then I'd be half mad. Anyway, when exactly did the Tientsin reactor melt down? Was it '75? Or '77? Or '79? When was the Imam Birjandi murdered? When was the nuking of Haifa? Who did kill Cock Robin?

Taqi, this never was your kind of knowledge.

When I was fifteen (that's to say, next year) I spent a few days with my Aunt Lisa down in London just before the Epidemic struck. She was friends with an American woman ... now what was her name? Rachel. Yes, Rachel Akerman. She was working in the US Embassy as an information officer. She was a downright randy lady, Rachel, though I didn't realize that, except in retrospect. Aunt Lisa and I went to a party in Rachel's flat in the same tower — and there I got drunk for the first time. I puked afterwards.

If I could ride the monorail down to London when I was fifteen, why not when I'm fourteen? After all, I've matured a lot in the last week — even if I do feel myself sliding back from the cool aplomb of

Celesteville into a naivete of the earlier flesh. If I can contact somebody in the American embassy... Can I possibly trust my fellow Britons? Containment is the name of the game in these islands. Oh, *bless* that Epidemic for shunting me to Ruhrstadt as an educational refugee. If we hadn't been so badly hit by the Epidemic I would never have got out. I would never have got off the surface of this planet. Of course, Ruhrstadt was lousy enough — though more orderly, need I say — and I can't possibly trust the Germans of this period either. As for the Russians and Chinese, British security police control all the comings and goings in and out of their embassies. The terrible secret that I know — the cause of the Epidemic — can, I think, only safely be told to one group of people, or else missiles might start flying...

Fourteen is a decent enough age to save the world, isn't it? Why, that kind of thing's the stuff of adventure stories on the Screen every week. Though usually the heroic boy co-operates with the security forces...

Incredibly, it comes off. Aunt Lisa will put me up. Mum and Dad will give me enough credit to let me go down to London for the mid-spring schoolbreak.

So down the monorail I presently bowl, reading a financial paper like some rich son of the Eurocracy — though I hardly look the part. Too fat. Too cheaply dressed. (Financiers, what things I could tell you!) Next year — that's to say, twenty-six years ago — what I was reading on the monorail train was Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, trying hard with my adolescent inexperience to fathom the amorous sentiments of Fabrizio del Dongo locked up in his tower, peeping out at his love. My own view of sex at the time was very much from a high tower too. Or else it was a thing of fear and humiliation at the swimming pool. The tweaking of the balls. Jerking off underwater.

The American bald eagle spreads its wings for me. Skytopia!

It's quite easy to go upstairs and buzz Rachel's door after Aunt Lisa has phoned her.

I go in.

"What would you say, Rachel, if I told you that I know the future? If I told you that there'll be a worldwide epidemic next year, which will spare the West Coast of America for reasons as yet unknown? But your best president in years will die because he's in the East, which means in turn..." I can go on for quite a while; and I do. I hope I have my facts in the right order; it's all so *long* ago.

Rachel laughs. (She has large wet lips.)

"You're really weird. You believe all this!"

Soon, I'm making real progress. I may be a fat slob of a schoolboy here; but up-time in Celesteville I'm distinctly *sympathique*.

"Would you care for a drink, Johnny?"

"Just so long as it isn't gin." It was gin that I got sick-drunk on at her party; the experience inoculated me against gin for ever more.

"Is that some private joke?"

Sure thing. I won't vomit gin this time. Just milk.

"Have you got access to the CIA desk, Rachel?"
"Oh, come on!"

"Let's just suppose you have. Now, how about dropping in on them tomorrow? Tell them you met a weird guy who described a fascinating satellite codenamed *Beagle*." When the scandal breaks in five years time, revealing a direct connection between the covert automated DNA experiments on board the *Beagle*, and the Epidemic... well, there'll almost be a nuclear war. The name *Beagle* won't mean Charles Darwin any more. "Just mention the name, and say that there's going to be a little bit of an epidemic of mutated cholera. Cold climate cholera. That ought to make them sit up. Oh, and you might add that if I tell anybody else there's quite likely to be a little cloud of radioactive dust in space — and you know what that could start."

"This sounds like a spy movie."

"Doesn't it just?"

"You're looking at me, Johnny."

"Here's looking at you. A cat can look at a queen."

"Like a cat who's found a bowl of milk."

"Purr."

Success! Relief! Back downstairs in bed I review Rachel's body and my plan of action. These two are superimposed. Here is a cusp, her breast, which is also the cusp where history either flows along its original course or else suffers a sudden discontinuity on to a different plane of events.

Orgasm of the flesh: orgasm of events exfoliating from this point! I suppose vomiting is a sort of orgasmic reflex too: a spasm of the muscles which spills something out of you. The congruence between sperm spilling from one tense organ and the milk of knowledge spewing from my gizzard occupies me for a moment. I'm sated, relaxed and gratified.

Day Two, of the new dispensation. I spend the day wandering round London.

In the evening I slip upstairs. More milk of knowledge and more sperm flow into Rachel. My ally, my bemused mistress — to whom I am suddenly a juvenile Rasputin — has done as she was bid. I love her for it. Energetically. I caress her cusps.

They come: two burly silent types — the sort who walk alongside motorcades — and the brain of the trio, a slice of American Gothic, Huffstickler by name. He's bespectacled (a funny old anachronism, even in 2063), and wears a herringbone suit with a tie knotted tight enough to rejoice a hangman. Huffstickler must throw a strangled tie away every night.

"Miz Akerman tells us you're interested in satellites. She said something about — what was the name, now? — something called a Beagle. We were just wondering —"

"I'll bet you're wondering. Now hear this very carefully: *Beagle* is going to malfunction soon and it's going to vent some of your cold cholera, which is going to drift down onto Japan. Not many people will realize for another five years just what it was that killed a few

hundred million people, including your President Greenberg. But when the information *does* leak out — and information always does leak — you are going to have to do some fancy footwork and pay out one hell of a lot of GNP in compensation. Or get nuked."

Huffstickler inspects his manicure. Abruptly he looks up; his eyes pin me like a butterfly ...

He inspects his nails again.

Again?

Nonsense vomits from my lips. Huffstickler gabbles some gibberish back at me. Suddenly I rush backwards to the door. How can I run backwards? Help me! It isn't me who rushes in reverse — this is being done to me! I'm accelerating. Blurred scenes flash backwards. No way to control this mad hindward roller-coaster! I vomit my breakfast. Resorb my excrement. The darkening of the dawn — and I die, no *I dream* — then the lightening of the previous night. Whoosh, goes yesterday, in flickers of London. Faster. Insane.

How long, how long? I'm riding down into a black hole where time turns inside out! Borne along, borne along.

Slowing, I'm slowing. I'm in Rachel's flat, for the first time. I'm naked in her bed, resorbing sperm from her flesh into mine! Resorbing the milk of knowledge!

I'm dressed, I dribble drink into a glass.

Lurch.

Time tips forward again...

"What would you say, Rachel, if I told you...?"

"Told me what, Johnny?"

"Nothing, nothing! I've got to be going..."

"But you just arrived."

I flee from the room, a foolish boy, shamed. I vomit into Aunt Lisa's washbasin, as though I've already drunk Rachel's gin next year.

The milk of knowledge I could not spew up. As soon as I tried to, I was... *rewound*. Back to the moment I initiated the series of events.

Are there rules to this game? Are there ethics? "Thou shalt not consort with one side at the expense of the human race at large"? "Thou shalt not use thy power for fornication"?

Who says so? Whose rules are they?

Exhausted, I creep to bed.

Day Two again. This time I approach the reception desk at one of the TV stations. Public information for the benefit of all...

I get passed upstairs — more as a joke, the silly season arriving months ahead of time. But as soon as I meet an actual news editor who begins to listen and make notes, *flip*: time winds me back again. Downstairs. I rush out of the TV station without approaching the reception desk, scowled at now by a suspicious guard.

At least, this time, I only lost twenty minutes. If it can be called losing time, when I gain it back again.

Yet I was able to tell the woman on the desk. Just as I was able to tell Rachel. Can I make private communications, but not public ones?

So who do I make them to? A psychiatrist?

Ja, yours is a most complex and integrated delusional system. Pardon me vile I open up your skull...

Oh Taqi, you never had this sort of trouble!

I try to phone the Government Ombudsman. Surprisingly, I get through. Presently the phone-tokens spit themselves back into my hand, unphoning him, leaving me where and when I was.

Again: I call at the Pan-Arab Cultural Center. Maybe they have Sufis employed on their staff — lords of hidden chains of cause and effect, who are also viziers of the practical world. Sufis are supposed to understand such things. Ibn 'Arabi was a Sufi.

And it seems that I'm in luck. They know the tale of Taqi, at least. And perhaps I have had a vision of the future, equivalent to his vision of Mohammed. Three hours, four, pass by while they put out feelers. They are being very delicate about the whole thing. I scoff desert dates; how yearningly the taste reminds me of Celesteville. I sip thimbles of real coffee, which my young palate marvels at and which my memory greets with joy.

Meanwhile events echo down the years, cascading about me.

And suddenly, with no warning, the world winds back. *No-o-o-o-o*... I howl down the hindward hours. I turn my steps away from the Cultural Center. No wise Sufi saved the day. No sheikh bailed me out.

Back home again.

Quote for the day (from S. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 1843):

"Did I not get myself doubly restored? Did I not get myself back again, precisely in such a way that I must doubly feel its significance? Only his children did Job not receive again double, because a human life is not a thing that can be duplicated. In that case only spiritual repetition is possible, although in the temporal life it is never so perfect as in eternity, which is the true repetition."

"How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? And if I am to be compelled to take part in it, where is the director? Is there no director? Whither shall I turn with my complaint?"

Thank you, Mum and Dad, I had a fine boyish holiday in thrilling London. And now I'm back to the tower-slot and the Infoscreen...and the swimming pool.

I suppose at least going to bed with Rachel was fun. Even though it never happened to her.

Never happened to her.

But to me it happened, yes.

And in a flash I realize that if incidents which the system rejects all get cancelled out for everybody but me — on account of their ramifications — why then, I can do any damn thing I please! I can thieve and rape and kill. As soon as I get caught and explain myself, then the whole period of time gets rewound! It snaps right back like elastic.

That makes theft seem pretty pointless. I'd be robbed of the proceeds. But perhaps not rape or

murder. I'd still have the satisfaction, if you can call it that.

And yet ... if I commit a crime and don't get found out for a very long time, and then get found out, I might be required to flip back years. Just as I'm about to board the shuttle up to Celesteville, a hand will descend upon my shoulder — and whoosh, I'll be whipped back two whole decades to my fourteen-year-old flesh again. That would be ghastly.

Anyway, at fourteen I'm hardly cut out for rape and mayhem.

Ought I to be? Am I really in some psychiatrist's memory simulator having my personality toughened up so that I will have the stamina to be part of some interstellar expedition?

There's no expedition. Nobody has any idea how to build a star-drive. Not yet, in 2090.

Is this a moral intelligence test of some sort? Am I being taught not to rape and murder, not even to wish to deviate?

No, it's no simulation. Of that I'm sure. This is the actual year 2063, and I walk around the terrain of Greater Birmingham, not the terrain of my mind. My body says so. This fart says so, wet and fruity.

And so this proto-criminal, me, accesses on the Infoscreen that book by Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, recalled from ten years in the future.

"Repetition is transcendence," writes our Danish philosopher. "If God Himself had not willed repetition, the world would never have come into existence. He would have recalled it all and conserved it in recollection." (Did He perhaps do just that, after all? In my one single case? Is he conserving me in recollection, buzzing around the divine neurons in a loop?) "He who wills repetition is matured in seriousness." Why should that be, Mr. Kierkegaard? "Because repetition represents repentance on Man's part, and atonement on the part of God..."

Such certainties did Kierkegaard discover on his own repetitious trip to Berlin in 1843, fleeing from the fair Regina Olsen, yearning to be reunited with her. What comparable certainties did I discover on my preemptive repeat-journey to London town, to the hot sheets of Rachel Akerman?

What am I on trial for? What am I supposed to represent about?

I've been set up. But was it by God — or by Man? I can't imagine that God would bother; I can't believe that Man could manage it.

But set up I have been.

"Repetition is an imperishable garment." Too right! Try to unpick it, and it knits itself back again right away.

A higher transcendental repetition awaits me? Does it indeed?

In eternity is the true repetition... And it's going to be eternal, this life of mine, if I get rewound every damn time I step out of line. And meanwhile the world will scrape along, with its epidemics, slaughters, disasters. And I will be powerless.

There's always suicide...

Is there? Is there indeed? Or if I kill myself, do I

get rewound back to the moment before I killed myself? Death is not lived through, said Wittgenstein. Can death be lived through in reverse?

Dare I kill myself as an experiment?

But maybe I'm already dead, and this is Hell or Purgatory: the eternal repetition of one's days.

Taqi, old friend, I've slid a long way from your notion of knowledge. Strange and unnatural punishment is where it's at now. Ought I to pray for forgiveness?

Just tell me what it is You want forgiven.

Reticent bastard, aren't You?

Listen, please: I apologize for being me. I'm sorry I am John Farrer. Deeply sorry.

But it seems that sorrow isn't enough.

Today the world stands still...

At first I didn't notice. I thought that the Infoscreen had simply stopped working.

But no. Everything has stopped, except for me. If I stay in the same place for too long, my own exhaled breath will asphyxiate me...

Mum stands motionless in the kitchen cubicle. A fly hangs in mid-air — and it isn't supported by any spider silk.

Outside, some way off, a police copter also hangs suspended; I can see each rotor blade as sharply as though it was parked on the ground.

Here is a single quantum moment of time, repeating itself over and over. I can move around in it, I alone, like somebody walking about in a holographic image — an image which is solid to the touch. It's a world in stasis. Is this the promised transcendental repetition, the eternal moment? Hardly, if my own waste gases stifle me!

Till that moment, though — till I become too weary to keep on the move — I can play with the world omnipotently! How can anything that I do be rewound now, when time itself stands still? The world is a toy, to be played with.

I guess I go a little crazy for the next few subjective hours. I break things. (The brick sails through the window, the glass erupts...then fails to fall down to the pavement.) I steal a sleek turbocar and drive around recklessly, careless of scrapes and bumps. I squash a stray dog into a red rug with my wheels. I presume that the turbocar functions normally because I'm connected to it; it's temporarily an extension of myself. I stop to set a fire in a bedding store. (The fire fails to burn. No doubt it would do so if I stood in it, consuming myself!) I stroll into a clothes store past the zombie guard. I inventory the young lady assistants, and choose one, and strip her and pose her acrobatically. (She does not awake, like Sleeping Beauty, at my caresses.) I screw her on the carpet, in Position Wow! of the *Kama Sutra*. She feels soft and warm, otherwise I suppose this would be necrophilia. I leave her poised, with my seed dripping from her. I notice a security copter stalled near a jeweller's. I steal their slug-rifle and blast holes in the sky. The trick now is to persuade time to flow on, not back! Despite the smog, the sky seems to stretch clear out to

interstellar space. No holes appear in it; no painted scenario tumbles down.

And I'm being followed. I'm sure of it. Somewhere in all this silent stasis of the world another engine buzzes. It buzzes for me.

Who is coming? Is it the milkman of knowledge? Far from me now the *Beagle*, the Tientsin meltdown, Donna Marquez of Peru...

I walk slowly around the turbocar. Keeping on the move. Ready to play statues.

Z-z-z-z...

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A motorbike swings into view...

Freeze!

Perched on it is a young woman. Skinny, red hair, freckled face. She wears red slacks, red blouse, red boots. She's fire, coming to burn me! And I blush for my delinquencies. Is she another pre-incarnate, like me?

She brakes.

"Hi there!"

She's...joyful.

"Hey John, you can't fool me! Boys your age don't drive turbos." She laughs merrily. "Oh, I've seen your handiwork, but don't be shy...it's quite understandable."

"Who are you? Will I get rewound if I speak to you? What's been going on?" I'm crying. With relief. I'm a bubbling boy, ashamed of my tears.

"Hey, one thing at a time! I'm Liz. I've been trying to track you down. But every time I got close, you pulled a trick — and it was back to the start again, for both of us!"

She dismounts, and we walk round each other, adjusting our orbits to grab free, oxygenated space.

"I was in Celesteville, John. The same as you were. Stinky back here, isn't it?"

"Am I am criminal? A sinner? Why is this happening?"

She taps her nose wisely.

"You're a sort of time traveler — or maybe I should say a probability traveler. They've done this. Them. I don't know what they are: essences, entities that inhabit time or probability instead of space? They can stick their heads — or their feelers — through the surface of the world like you or I stick a glass-bottomed tube into a pond. What do the fish know about what's up at the other end?"

Superior entities. So. The idea of those is preferable to other explanations.

"Why has the world stopped?" I ask her. "Is the game over now? It seems such a silly game, this — just me and you...Liz. What are we: champions, representatives of the human race? What's it all about?"

"Johnny, there could be a billion alternative histories side by side. An infinite number of them. Maybe that's the kind of cosmos they inhabit. I just had to reach you. There was a time limit. Obviously it's up now. But," she grins, "here I am." She shakes her red mane free of CO₂.

"These 'entities'...I can't say that I noticed any back in 2090! Did anybody else notice them apart from you?"

"But we aren't from '90, John! We're from '95. That's the year when they intruded. They didn't give you complete fore-memory — or you'd have sussed this out. But they made me able to sense...the probability of where you were. And every time you acted to change history, well, it was just like snakes and ladders! I'd be rewound. Low probability of finding you again. Bloody frustrating. You really threw me off by going to London like that.

She paces faster, breathing deeper.

"But what's going on in '95? Celesteville must be in chaos. The whole Earth must be!"

"They're...a zone of foggy light out in space near L-4, and trailing Skystopia too. And there's one on the Moon, and lots of them down on Earth. Like cuckoo-spit. Sentient time-mazes is what they are, but to creatures locked in a single time line like us they just look like bright fog."

"But—"

"Let's celebrate my finding you!" She skips up to me, she plants a kiss. Her tongue slides into my mouth. A few moments later we both slide on to the back seat of the turbo; she thumbs the seat to recline into a bed.

Strange way to greet a fat boy, even if he's really svelte and forty-odd years old! It's a parody of my earlier conquest of Rachel. A replay.

Can't be bothered to resist her wiry grip...At least a friend in adversity is something. Feeling sluggish, drowsy. Liz, Liz, I don't know your second name. Are you rescuing me? Or destroying me? Is this what they told you to do, to snap us out of it? Asphyxiate me? Kill me? Heavy and light: too heavy to move, weightlessly afloat on this soft seat...

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I'm floating weightlessly, breathing easily...

I'm in a place of light, in a cotton wool limbo, with silence in my ears. No, faint static. I'm afloat.

I'm in a suit, a *space-suit*. I'm in my future body! The limbo surrounds me, the luminous fog, but it feels as though I'm in space. Maybe I'm adrift along the null-axis on the center of Celesteville and climate control has broken down, producing a vast fog...But no, I wouldn't be in a space-suit there.

The fog seems brighter over in that direction.

I pulse the attitude jet. I drift. Towards the brightness. Suddenly the sun blazes forth. Blackness and bright, unwavering stars too. I'm on the edge of a globe of milky froth suspended in space. It's the milk of knowledge whipped into a foam, into a cloud of unknowing.

A few moments after I emerge, radio voices chatter in my ears.

"Dr. Farrer!"

"John!"

"You're back!"

"Do you read me, Farrer?"

"Are you okay?"

A shuttle hangs some way off, silver fish with antennae fins. Further, shrunk by distance, is the familiar thirty-klick long cylinder of Celesteville!

A tiny scooter is jetting towards me, to rendezvous.

"I read you. Whoever you are."
For all I know, it's still 2090.

*** * * * *

But it's 2095, just as Liz told me.

I learn that back in Celesteville, safely quarantined underground away from the fields and forests just in case I fill them with cotton wool.

I'm a hero, it seems. I'm the first person to emerge from the cloud with most faculties intact. Other volunteers have regressed to babyhood; some have gone mad. But Dr. John Farrer merely had the top of his memory creamed off. The bulk of the milk remains.

So here are my colleagues. Wolfgang Hesse; Francoise Gilot; Ernst Zandell; Richard Devenish. Good friends, from five-plus years ago. And Maria Menotti, my lover, of more recent vintage. So she tells me. I've forgotten her, but I will rediscover her. Perhaps we will take out a marriage contract when I get to know her again.

I'd been in the white cloud for seven days. They had given up hope. But my air-tanks only record a four-hour stay — and my memory knows that I was in there for weeks. Weeks of 2063.

The principal anxiety about the zones is not the fate of people who go into them. It is the fate of history itself — and therefore of the present — at the hands of whoever goes in. Earth, home of chaos, will not leave the zones alone. A sort of wildly dangerous time-war is going on, under the excuse of "investigating." Volunteers are being sent into the different zones on Earth: fanatics, hypnotized programmed agents "high" on Islam or Marxism or one or other Nationalism or Racism. And each time, shortly after such volunteers go in, patches of alternative reality spring into existence down on Earth. These patches measure ten or twenty square kilometres and endure for several hours or even several days until the baseline present reasserts itself again. We have a fairly good tap into the data-nets of the countries concerned. The results of their investigative interference have been: slave worlds, religious dictatorships worse than any Inquisition, radioactive wildernesses, a world where the white races all died of selective disease, one untrustworthy "utopia" where space has been abandoned... And each time that a spurious present temporarily asserts itself, a sort of shock wave, a quivering, passes through the whole of the real world like the reverberations of a gong beat — as though everything is about to change, and maybe it does change for a microsecond but then changes back again immediately. This is even felt out here at Celesteville.

"But you couldn't alter anything at all!" Wolfgang Hesse says jubilantly. "You tried to, but you couldn't. Maybe this whole sorry mess is coming to an end."

"More important," points out Richard Devenish, "is the fact that John seems to have made contact with whatever operates these zones. I refer to the creature who called herself 'Liz.'"

"Unless she was just some sort of anima-figure, a projection of his own subconscious which led him back home?" Maria Menotti sounds jealous of the possible

existence of Liz.

"No," says Devenish. "This is the first substantive meeting inside. Well, it's the first one that we know of. I really believe we've made contact."

"What with? With these entities that Liz talked about?"

"Don't you see? 'Liz' must be one of them, herself. This is our first real lead, Maria. The people down on Earth are just running through the time-mazes like lobotomised rats."

"Liz still could have been John's super-ego. He was rather naughty in there."

"A few misdemeanors, that's all. John has come back sane."

"I lost five years," I point out mildly, eyeing Maria. She knows my body; but I do not know hers.

"You ought to see the others. They lost their minds. John, you're our interface with this thing. With them."

"Now, you aren't suggesting for God's sake that I go back again?"

Devenish spreads his hands.

"What other choice is there? Should we just sit around lamely till one of those rotten alternative world-lines firms up — and we all suddenly quiver out of existence? Or we find ourselves back on Earth, with Celesteville a vain dream? We have loyalties, man — to history as it was, to the history which led us to Celesteville. We have a loyalty to the human race as a going concern. We may be just like so many mice in a time-maze, to them. But we have a vested interest in stabilizing this particular pathway as the true and only present. And I honestly believe that this one is the only one that leads to the stars. Eventually."

"Well..."

"Good man!"

The space scooter stands off. I jet alone into the white fog. Radio contact cuts off once I enter the cloud.

I'm...walking through the fog, upon a solid surface. Gravity tugs me. Consulting the sensors strapped to my forearm, I discover that I can breathe the fog. It is comprised of nitrogen, oxygen, traces of noble gases. The pressure is Earth-normal. Am I now congruent with all the other zones on Earth?

I spy movement in the fog. A shape. Red hair, dimmed by the milky smoke. Same red slacks, blouse, boots.

I crack my helmet open.

"Hi! You came back — that's good. You're...constant. You've got consistency, Johnny." So has the fog beneath my feet.

"Out there." I jerk my thumb, "they want to know..."

"Do you want to know?" She laughs, witchlike. "Do you crave the power that knowledge brings?"

"Our whole world might change."

"That would be a real shame, Johnny. But there's something more important than knowledge. Firm existence is more important. You, Johnny, exist. You are. Your world is. It be-s. But what is Being? Are we Beings? No, we cannot 'be' in the way that you can.

You show us what it is 'to be.' Our intrusion threatens you with all possible world-lines, which is where we dwell: in the multiverse, not in your single universe. You tune all other existences out, bar one. We can make the world jump tracks. We can juxtapose. But we don't really wish to. Your singular reality is what we love."

"I love it too. Please leave us alone."

"Can the lover quit the loved one? Besides, your love conforms with ours. It was *you*, your own deep desire, which wound time back to its baseline. It wasn't us, Johnny." Liz examines her fingers as though they amuse her. She makes a cage of them. "This...constraint is very attractive to us. For where all possibilities are equal, none of them actually *is*. None truly exists. They are only waves of probability. But *you* exist. You have constructed a pocket of fierce deterministic causality. It's formed by the nature of your consciousness. It's embedded in the multiverse like a seed crystal. You have one true future — if we don't make the tracks jump."

"Do you know our one true future?"

She nods.

"Then why alter it? Or is it no future at all? What is it?"

"Ah, that delicate moment when you sell your soul!"

"So that's it, is it? You want to be paid? What with?"

"Why, with the experience of what it is *to be*, Johnny."

"I don't understand."

"We can infuse you, like a glass of milk drunk down and entirely digested, becoming part of every cell in your body, every nerve path in your mind. Passing down to your children, and to theirs. You'll be unaware of it. Unaware of us, as will your children be, and theirs. It'll simply be as though, suddenly, you have inherited a soul. You will know the 'one true future, and then you'll be just as before: you'll know it no longer, but you'll set out to reach it. And you'll become that future. And you'll have got rid of us and of the changes because we'll be at one with you in that future, for ever more. But you have to open your heart and mind to us freely."

"And what happens if we won't let you...incarnate yourselves in us?"

"Inevitably we shall wrap your world in shrouds of possibility. Causality will ruin itself. Many timelines will coexist. There will be *chaos* for you — until probability worlds become so multiplied that the winds of the multiverse can blow us away again. But for you it will be too late."

"So it's tails we lose, heads you win."

"But you *don't* lose. You gain your one true future. And we attain reality: your single reality." Liz smiles. "Is your problem how you, as one representative, may possibly bind your whole race? At a distant enough time in the future, Johnny, as your genes mix and co-mix again, eventually you will be part of all of your kind. This is how a bargain with your single self binds everyone, in the long run. And this of course proves—"

"—that we have millions of years ahead of us! So

the future has to work out, or you couldn't possibly make this offer? But...ah, have you offered this deal to other races out in space?" Other races, who may have refused — even at the expense of their own solid reality? Because the alternative was worse?

"Perhaps there are no other *beings*, but yourselves? Perhaps there are only waves of probability elsewhere? Here alone is the seed crystal, found after long searching. Perhaps. Choose, Johnny. It grows urgent. Drink us down deep into you — or be haunted by shifting realities till your world becomes a kaleidoscope."

"God Almighty, what sort of choice is that? Get on with it. Immerse yourself in me. Yourselves, whatever you are!"

Liz comes closer.

"How better shall such knowledge be conveyed, than in a kiss? With this kiss I seal your own true future. A kiss that swoons you..."

The one true future history of humanity. Yes, oh yes indeed. All that. But it's the *tragedy* that most of all I understand. Their tragedy, and ours...

For this single moment, this simple moment almost banal except for its rather weird surrounding circumstances, is the moment of creation.

Why did we ever think that creation had to begin at the beginning? Creation does not — *did not* — occur fifteen billion years ago. Nor does it occur fifty billion years hence, when the universe swallows itself up and vomits itself out again. It occurs right here, right now. There is nothing particularly privileged about this moment a quarter or a fifth of the way through "time," except that it is the *one*.

Until now — but no longer — all cosmoses equally coexisted, each redeeming the other from random nonexistence by probabilistic interplay. No longer so. Now only one cosmos exists. Hereafter, one cosmos. Heretofore, one cosmos.

Before, in the parallel streams of the multiverse, there could never be any such thing as a true beginning. But now there is one definite beginning. And because of this, there can be a definite ending too. At last a single universe is locked into place, into one reality. The flux is finished; the wave function of the multiverse has collapsed. Like undescended testicles the Godly essences of probability have now descended into existence, into being at last. They have found what they have been looking for since forever. Now they can die; they can cease to be — at last. Not yet, of course — but thirty or forty billion years downtime, when this single universe reaches its end and becomes nonexistent.

That huge span of history — of our evolving glory, yes I can say that: the glory of our future proliferation and growth even beyond Andromeda, and beyond the local family of galaxies — is as nothing compared with...with the infinite realms of probability sustaining forever a multiverse, which now is no more.

They have achieved absolute actuality through us, and so one day they can cease. They can die once our great future history — so much vaster than the paltry thousand year span granted to Faust — draws to its

absolute *finis*. Now the universe *is*; and sometime ahead, it isn't any longer.

They are, in a sense — oh yes, I see now — ourselves, a mode of perception scattered across all the branching multiverse, a universal metaconsciousness. Now, that multiverse is no more. Creation *is*, instead: one solid, self-consistent creation. Which will cease. Forever.

No wonder they — or it — spoke the language of macroprobability to us. It was what sustained them, and the ghostly multiverse. But now macroprobability is dead. The fluid has been crystallized in a shock wave, as multiverse collapses into universe — though on the quantum level microprobability still continues, until the end.

The end.

God, then, will have died, and achieved nothingness. Have I killed God by incarnating Him? God wished to die. Yes, I've drunk the milk of knowledge from Her lips...

Life binds time. Life is rare. Rare as it is, other wiser alien races have been made this offer down the aeons. Though their reality fell apart — for a very long time, into terrible ages of chaos, of multiplicity, shifting world lines, till eventually it knit again into a semblance of the old causality — they all refused to accept, for the sake of true infinity and eternity. All, that is, except for us. And how we will be rewarded for it! Oh glory, oh wo.

Or John Farrer strolls the curving meadows of Celesteville, arm in arm with Maria Menotti, who is dressed only in brief shorts. Five kilometres above, curving forests hang over their heads. Sunlight pours through the thirty-klick long window panels, from the space mirrors. John and Maria come to a rustic chalet. Here they strap on wings.

And briefly, so briefly that they are hardly aware of it, a curious event occurs. As they prepare to launch themselves aloft, a solitary flamingo beats by, swishing the air. And, for a timeless moment, for an immeasurable time, it halts on the wing. Before flying on. John's heart thumps. No, it merely skipped a beat.

Now John and Maria fly up too. They fly up. Most of the way towards the mid-axis. Then they lie back in the tropical air. They bask. They will make winged love soon.

John preens himself.

"There's enough fuel tucked away in old Sol to last for almost ever. Billions of years is almost forever. Oh, we've come through! And long, long before forever we'll be out among the stars — even among the galaxies!"

"Such certainty," Maria laughs. "And how soulful you sound."

"But I am certain. I do know. Somehow."

"Maybe we've already done it, in some alternate world?" she teases. "Gone out to the stars fifty years ago!"

"No," says John, with entire conviction. "There aren't any alternate worlds. If there were, you would have an infinite amount of time in parallel. The universe — no, the *multiverse* — would be never-ending.

And obviously it isn't. But I don't think that need bother us." He returns the mirrored smile of the sun. "Almost forever is fine by me!"

He reaches for her. Daedalus and a lady Icarus make love, high above the man-made world. In actual fact they are falling slowly as they entwine; but so slowly that they have plenty of time. And though they do not know it, this is the moment of conception.

— ABO —

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What Brothers Are For

By Patricia Anthony

Art By Byron Taylor

Pa had whupped Daniel three times that day: once for fidgeting in the morning service, once for leaving his chores half done, and the last time, the worst time, for laughing and saying that the other whuppings hadn't hurt.

Zeke followed his brother as he ran from the house. By the time he caught up to him, Daniel had stopped pretending the whupping didn't matter and was crying for real. Snot ran from his nose, leaving a trail of slime from one nostril to his lips.

Daniel's crying made Zeke feel funny. The welts on his brother's legs looked like they hurt. "Hey. Wanna see a neat rock?" Zeke asked, pulling the stone from his pocket.

Daniel took the rock and held it in a slimy fist. "It's got funny pictures all over it. Where'd you get it?"

"Place I know," he said vaguely. Daniel's tears had dried, and Zeke's pity had dried up with them. "Now give it back. Come on, Daniel. Give it back. I'll pound on you worse than Pa done. I'll set you on fire and fan you."

"Lemme go. I'll tell Pa," Daniel said.

Zeke released him instantly. "No!" he said so all-of-a-sudden that a sneaky look came to the younger boy's face.

"So. Where'd you get it?"

Zeke stared longingly at the rock in Daniel's fist. "Come on. Give it back. It ain't so neat. There's lots of neater things where that come from. They got arrowheads and bows. Junk like that." He felt betrayed, but he thought that's what he deserved for trusting his brother.

The snot on Daniel's lip was a crisp film. He was clutching the rock as if he meant business. "I wanna go."

"Nuh uh. It's too dangerous. What if we get stuck out and the sun goes down, huh? What about that?"

His little brother scuffed a foot in the dirt. "You're always afraid of the dark. Just like Pa. Just like Ma. Shutting up the windows at night and listening for things."

"Yeah?" Zeke asked with older-brother derision. "And just how you expect to hear them demon ghosts when they come, huh? Gotta have the fire built up and the shotgun ready."

"There ain't no ghosts."

"Sure there ain't," Zeke sneered. "Sure. Guess it

was a lion or something et Downy Phoebe and all them others."

"I'll tell Pa if you don't take me," Daniel said again. "I'll show him the rock."

"Shoot," Zeke said under his breath. "All right, but we gotta hurry. And gimme the rock back, first."

"Naw. Think I'll keep it till you take me to that place."

Without another word, Zeke pushed off with stiff, angry legs across the grass.

It was a loud, blue day. Red squirrels chittered in the tender leaves of a young maple. The boys walked fast, Zeke slapping at branches and rocks with a stick he'd picked up.

"I could of told Pa more things about you, you know? I could of done more than showed him that rock," Daniel said, picking his way around the thick pines and the spindly trunks of the hardwoods.

"What things?" Zeke asked a little uneasily. There were all sorts of sins to worry about: little sins that got you a mean look and big sins that got you a whupping. Some of the sins, Zeke knew, would push your soul right over the edge, right where God couldn't catch you anymore, and you'd fall a long way into a lake of fire.

His brother's face had screwed itself into a grown-up frown, the expression of a deacon who'd just come across a real meaty sin. "Like talking with that space captain."

Zeke froze. That sin was serious. A whupping-with-a-belt kind of sin, if Pa found out.

There was an ugly smile on Daniel's face. "Pa'd have a calf if he knew you talked to a heathern. They'd talk about you in service. Might even turn you out like they did Barney Potts so's them demon ghosts of yours could eat you."

"That space captain weren't no heathern," Zeke said calmly, even though the idea of being turned out disturbed him. Barney Potts had screamed when they'd closed and locked the door on him. Daniel had never heard a grown man cry before he'd heard the sounds that came from Barney.

To make the flippy feeling in his stomach go away, Zeke threw his arms over Daniel's shoulders and toppled him to the soft earth. His fingers found the ticklish places at Daniel's ribs. Daniel laughed until his face got tomato red and tears started up in his eyes. Then he started to hit back. A wild fist, no bigger

than a late season apple, hit Zeke on the side of his neck.

Startled, Zeke rolled off his brother. "Why'd you hit me so hard?" he asked.

Daniel wiped the tears from his eyes and sat up, his back hunched, his gaze averted. "Made me piss myself," Daniel said quietly. "I pissed myself all over."

Zeke rolled over on his back and hooted into the black-green pines. A banded blue jay flew out of a branch like a bullet of gray mist, leaving the branch twitching behind it.

"I guess you won't tell Pa about the space captain now. I could let everybody at school know about you peeing down your leg," he said, even though his brother wetting his pants wasn't anything Zeke would have told to anybody except God. He'd have to declare it to God because Zeke figured that somehow, someway, he'd come close to one of those little bitty sins. The little bitty sins counted up, and if you lived long enough, they'd get you. God'd drop down out of the air like a hawk and take your soul someplace so bad you'd wish you'd never been born.

Daniel clambered to his feet as his brother watched. Zeke was, without even wanting to be, somber and sympathetic. "Ain't like you pissed yourself bad, Daniel. It'll all be dry by the time we get there."

In fact, the spot of damp on the front of Daniel's pants had dried and stiffened well before they reached even the edges of the old forest.

"Didn't tell me we'd have to go in here," Daniel said, hanging back from the blue vines and the dank, dark cellar smell.

"You don't have to come, if you don't want to." Zeke picked a vine out of his way and walked in. The silent forest closed at his back. A few seconds later he heard the snap of a twig behind him and knew that Daniel had followed.

In the fetid air Zeke could hear the labored, snotty sound of Daniel's breathing. "What'd you and that space captain talk about?" Daniel asked.

"Just things. Neat things. They got more stuff on other planets, you know," his brother said sarcastically. "Like plows that go by themselves without anyone moving them. Things like that."

"I ain't stupid," Daniel retorted, his own sarcasm sounding childish. "I know. The kids talk."

"Uh huh."

"Bet they have chickens that don't need to be fed and water that walks its way into the house and trash that takes itself out and burns itself up, too."

"How did you know that?" Zeke asked. "Don't none of the grown-ups talk about that."

Daniel came up alongside his brother. He shrugged as they walked. "Everybody knows. Why don't Pa get one of them plows?"

"Cause them plows is heathern. And them self-feeding chickens and walking water is, too."

"You believe that?" Daniel asked, a little too directly to be comfortable for Zeke.

Zeke shrugged. "We come here in a space ship and stuff. Don't know how they took to that real good. I mean, if the other stuff is heathern, why wasn't the

space ship heathern, too?"

"We did?" Daniel stopped in the middle of the trail and stared wide-eyed at his brother. "We come here in a space ship?"

"Not you, stupid. But our Ma and Pa done. They come here from Earth when they was young."

There was a look on Daniel's face like had been on it the time Zeke had told him there wasn't really a Santa Claus. "Thought this was the Earth," Daniel said.

"No, dummy. We're a colony," he said, drawing out the syllables the way the space captain had done. "There's lots of colonies." He looked up at the place where the blue sky should have been. Triangular red leaves looked down. "All up there," Zeke gestured. "The captain told me. Said as how there were hundreds and hundreds of them things, all up in the stars."

"We there yet?" Daniel wanted to know.

"Almost," Zeke answered, disappointed and a little irritated that Daniel didn't think what the captain told him was the most wonderful thing he'd ever heard.

Without warning they stepped out of the overgrowth. Sunlight hit them like a blow. Between charcoal stumps of trees the stench of old smoke lay like a fog.

Picking his way across the ashes, Zeke headed for a pile of soot and dug his arm in to the elbow. When he drew it out there was a bit of gray bone clutched in his fist.

"Oh, man," Zeke said in disgust, flinging it away from him. The jagged cylinder of bone, its soft heart now empty, sailed across the burned scar of the forest, tumbling as it went. It landed several yards away with a rustling crash.

"I never seen this fire. We could see it from the house, right? How come I ain't seen this fire?"

Zeke avoided his brother's gaze. "Cause it burned before you was born, that's why." He pried his arm out of the refuse. His hand was empty.

"Why ain't it grown back?"

"Dunno," Zeke said as he pulled a claw-like branch off a ruined tree to his side. He dug into the pile of trash with hard, short strokes. An avalanche of damp soot fell on his legs, dirtying his pants.

"Don't make sense that it wouldn't grow back."

"It's a nasty place. And them trees is nasty trees, like they found when they first came here. Ain't like pines nor oaks. No telling what they'd do." He pried into the pile, lifting an edge of it. Small pieces of black rained down.

"That space captain tell you this?"

Zeke turned to his brother, his face white around the smudges of gray. "No, and don't you never tell you been here, understand?"

"Pa'll whup us, I reckon."

"More than that" Zeke said darkly. "Be a lot worse than that. What they done..." His voice failed because his throat felt funny. Picking up the stick, he applied it to the pile again.

"What who done?"

"Everybody." The word came out flat. A dead

word from a mouthful of ashes.

"But what was it they done?"

Zeke looked at his brother and then quickly away. "They killed all the demons, that's what."

Daniel shrugged. "Don't sound like no big deal."

"Shows how rot gut stupid you are. That space captain find out, he'd take us all away to jail. And don't never tell nobody I bring you here. It's a real big, grown-up secret." Suddenly Zeke whooped with glee. "Lookit. Found another one of them stones." Stooping, he picked up the piece of sedimentary rock in his hand and gave it to his brother.

"Neat pictures."

"Them's demon pictures. Can't show nobody, okay?"

Carefully Daniel slipped the stone into his pocket. "Okay."

Both boys bent and searched through the rubble for more. Zeke found a clay jar with demon pictures on it and Daniel found two double-pronged arrowheads.

Zeke was startled when he looked up from his search to see that the shadows of the trees had gone long and blue. "Daniel," he said softly when his mouth had enough spit in it to talk. "Think we need to go on home."

Daniel darted among the black tree stumps, bang-bang-banging away with an imaginary pistol. His voice echoed in the clearing.

"Come on, Daniel. It's late," Zeke said.

The smaller boy laughed as he peered over the top of a fallen tree. "Bang," he said, shooting an index finger at his brother. "Another dead demon."

"I'm gonna go, okay? I'm gonna leave you here and let them ghosts get you."

But Daniel had disappeared behind one of the piles and now was no place to be seen. His absence caused a hollow place to grow inside Zeke's chest.

"Daniel?" he called again.

A deep-throat growl from the northwest made the short hairs on Zeke's neck stand. He stood and sniffed into the breeze. The bass snarl repeated itself.

"Daniel!" Zeke screamed. The scream tore at his throat, making him cough. "Daniel!" He started to cry. "Where are you? Come on! It's gonna rain."

Abruptly Daniel was there, looking up with astonishment at the tears on his big brother's face.

They set across the field of ash at a stumbling run, Zeke clutching Daniel's arm. The breeze teased once before it turned fresh and fierce, lifting the hair on their foreheads and tugging at their shirts.

At the edge of the forest Daniel fell to his knees. Zeke paused to help him up, and then they ran on, their lungs sucking in the humid air. Odd orange-crusted twigs caught at their clothes and whipped into their faces.

"I'm tired," Daniel whined as he tried to pull out of Zeke's grasp.

"Not now. We gotta get home. We gotta get home quick."

Daniel dropped to the ground, nearly pulling Zeke off his feet. "Let go of me. I'm tired. My legs hurt. Got blisters on my feet."

Zeke turned. Lifting his arms, he beat his brother about the head and shoulders with his open palms.

"Get up! Get up, damn it! Get up right now!"

Daniel let Zeke's stinging blows fall on his back. "Pa'll whup you for saying 'damn'."

"I don't give a shit about a whupping," Zeke said. Abruptly he stopped hitting his brother and fell down next to him on the ground. His arms wrapped themselves around his shoulders. "Danny. Danny. We gotta get home." Zeke was crying so hard now he looked like Daniel when he cried. His nose ran.

"Don't know why you're afraid of the rain. Rains ever night," his brother said with a pout. He rubbed his shoulder where his brother had hit him.

"Dark comes with the rain, Danny," Zeke whispered. "Dark comes."

The thing to the northwest gave a growl that shook the trunk behind their backs. "We ain't never gonna make it home now," Zeke said in a thin, cry-baby voice that embarrassed him. "Oh, God. Shouldn't of ever come. We ain't never gonna make it home before dark."

As soon as he said it, it was like it had already happened. Everything fell into place. Daniel and Zeke had sinned and now God was going to get them. Without interest he watched as his little brother shook dirt out of his shoe.

"I'm ready," Daniel said, his bright face turned up. "Said I'm ready. You deaf, or what?"

Blindly Zeke got to his feet and stumbled his way through the strange-smelling trees.

They were still in the old forest when the last bit of light began to die. Red leaves became gray. Purple-brown trunks turned to black. The orange moss on the branches began to glow with an unearthly light. A ghostly kind of light.

"Oh, God forgive me," Zeke said half to himself. "I shouldn't never of showed you that rock."

"Pa's gonna whup us sure," Daniel said, missing the point.

A fat, cold drop fell on the back of Zeke's hand, and he remembered that they were going to die. Dying didn't seem real, but the ghosts did. He could imagine them coming out, rank after rank of them, glowing in the night like that orange moss, wanting to know where their stone pictures were. Wanting their arrowheads back. Asking why he threw that bone.

"It's raining," Daniel said in a complaining voice.

"I know."

Coming out from the old forest was like coming out of a grave. The wind bent the tops of the pines. Across the west lightning flashed, leaving a pink after-image on Zeke's retina.

The rain was nearly too loud to talk over. Zeke found his way around the soft rises of land where the trees grew thick. Dragging his brother along by the hand, he sought the clear, open spaces, the lower spots, where water splashed ankle high.

"You sure we ain't lost?" Daniel asked in a strained shout.

"Guess it don't matter if we're lost or if we ain't."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked, his voice barely louder than the rushing of the water.



Instead of answering, Zeke pulled Daniel up with him into the nearest thicket. They sat together at the foot of a pine, huddled against the rain.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked again. "What do you mean it don't matter?" The sound of the rain under the branches was a steady drip, drip, drip instead of the wild howl it had been in the open.

"We ain't going home, Danny."

"Sure we are. We're going home." Daniel's voice was shrill.

"No, we ain't. We ain't never gonna make it. We're gonna die just like all them others."

He wondered what the ghosts would look like when they came. He'd only seen their bones. They had had

long arms and clawed feet. Would their eyes bulge with dark glee when they saw them? Zeke wondered. And would Downy Phoebes and Horace Watson and Barney Potts be with them? Next to his right side Daniel cuddled, a line of warmth down his ribs.

Zeke disentangled himself from his brother and stood up. "You stay here a minute. I'm going up more in the trees, see if I can see our house lights from here."

"Okay," Daniel said doubtfully.

"I mean it. You stay here. Right where I can find you. Don't you move, understand?"

"I ain't deaf."

Zeke pushed his way through the prickly needles until he found a steady tree to climb. Easing himself into the lower branches, he saw a faint light to the south. The wind blew and the glow vanished, leaving him wondering if he had seen it at all.

Clambering down the tree, he walked to the right, keeping his eyes on the spot where he thought the glimmer might have been. Three yards later he lost his footing and fell into a blackberry bush. His legs were caught in something thicker than water; less thick than mud.

Pulling on the bush, he eased his body forward. The muck gave his legs back with a disappointed pop. When he tried to push himself up, the ground swallowed his arm to his shoulder.

"Jesus," he whimpered.

He jerked on the bush so hard that he stripped leaves away. Earth crept into his open mouth; embraced his chest and clambered up his back. Rain fell into his eyes, but he had no free hand to wipe it away. It was then he learned a great, adult truth about death, that sometimes it's less painful than simply inconvenient.

Something moved in the bushes to his right. His breath stopped in his throat.

"Zeke?" something said. It sounded like his brother.

Zeke didn't answer. He pictured the bug-eyed thing not five yards away. Its wide toe-claws would have dug into the dirt. The long hands would be at its side, waiting.

"Zeke?" Daniel asked. "You okay?"

The terrified little voice could only have come from Daniel. Ghosts didn't have anything to be scared of. Now that he was pretty sure he wasn't going to drown, Zeke felt sort of stupid.

"I'm here," he said quietly. "Don't come no closer. There's real bad sticky mud. You'll get caught."

There were thrashing noises as Daniel oriented himself.

"Okay. Now, what I need for you to do is lay down in this blackberry bush and grab me."

Daniel's voice was pouty. "But them thorns'll eat me alive."

"Damn it, Daniel!" Zeke snapped. "Lay down in that bush and grab my hand! Hear me? You hear me? If you don't help, I'm gonna drown!" There was no reply. There was no movement of the bush, either. He could picture Daniel on the other side, thinking it out.

"Daniel!"

"Yeah?"

"You lay down in that bush right now, and you grab my hand, hear? This is real serious. This ain't no game or nothing."

There was the crunch of vegetation and then, "Ow," and another, "Ow." Daniel's small fingers found Zeke's.

The suction gave Zeke's body back to him in little parts: an arm, a leg, a foot. When it was over, he lay on his back on the blackberry bush, hardly noticing the thorns.

"You said we was gonna die," Daniel said.

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, we gonna die, or what?" Daniel sounded confused rather than frightened.

"I reckon," Zeke said got up on his and knees. His body didn't want to hold him.

"I'm hungry," Daniel said.

Zeke crawled his way to the solid ground under the pines. He curled up under the canopy.

"I'm cold," his brother said.

Zeke's eyes were closing in spite of the ghosts.

"Pa's gonna come for us, ain't he?"

"No, Daniel. Pa ain't gonna come for us. Nobody will." Nobody living, he remembered.

He wondered if he'd fight to protect Daniel. He should. That's what brothers were for. But he didn't know if love could be stronger than fear, even though Reverend Sorenson said it cast fear out. It'd be easier if the ghosts took them both together. He prayed for that, and in the middle of prayer fell into a sweet, forgetful sleep.

The next time Zeke opened his eyes it was daylight. Over his head a line of ants crawled in fire-drill order down the resinous bark of a pine.

Zeke sat up and touched himself all over before checking Daniel. His little brother was sleeping, chest tucked to legs like a cat. His pink mouth was open. "Daniel," Zeke whispered, shaking him by one shoulder.

A blue eye wavered open.

"Daniel. I think we're alive."

A thin sound, something between a snore and a complaint, came from the open mouth. Daniel turned over. He made a snicking sound with his throat.

Zeke dug in his shirt pocket and found the small jar, still intact. Stick figures marched themselves around the sides, their stick hands piled with things. Food, maybe. Maybe flowers. It didn't show it, but he imagined the figures had once been happy.

"Daniel," Zeke called after a while.

This time Daniel sat up, rubbing his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said.

"I know. Let's check and see if the ground's solid, and then we'll go on home."

Daniel ran before Zeke could catch him. His small legs pumped; his hands windmilled. With a whoop he darted down the side of the slope to where Zeke had nearly drowned. His feet made shallow impressions in the mud.

After steeling himself, Zeke followed. The spot would have looked innocent in the sunlight except that

the blackberry bush was stripped of its leaves.

Daniel stopped running to limp. His feet must have still been bothering him. "Are we the only ones who ever made it back?"

"So far as I know," Zeke said. Somehow that bothered rather than cheered him.

Daniel, though, was beside himself. "We're gonna be famous. We're gonna be spoke about in service, and they're all gonna thank God that we come back."

"Uh huh," Zeke said doubtfully. "But you know what?"

Daniel had never liked the you-know-what game. Instead of replying, he kicked the smooth floor of the hollow.

Zeke suddenly realized why there were no pebbles on the path. "I had the feeling like that gunk could of buried me right there, with no sign of me left behind."

"I don't get it," Daniel said. He was grinning ear-to-ear, too happy about their being special to think about anything else.

"What if there ain't no ghosts, Daniel? What if that night mud was what caught up Downy Phoebe's and Horace Watson and all them others?"

Daniel was skipping in spite of his bad feet.

"Daniel?" Zeke asked worriedly. "What if there ain't no ghosts?"

The idea horrified Zeke. He'd lived with the ghosts all his life. They'd been a fixture, just like Ma and Pa had been a fixture. Thinking that the ghosts might not be real left him with a sense of vertigo that might have been relief or loss.

"We'll just tell them, that's what," Daniel said after a moment's thought. "Then we'll be more famous than ever."

Zeke chewed his lip as he followed his brother. By the time they reached the house, his mouth was raw.

The house was too quiet. The stock hadn't been put out of the barn. The chickens were still in the coop. He drew his brother back toward the nearest stand of trees and waited.

"I'm hungry," Daniel said. "I want to see Ma."

"I know. Shut up."

A little while later Pa opened the door and set off across the yard. Zeke stood up. Daniel stood with him.

Pa glanced toward them and stopped in his tracks, his face white against the red plaid of his shirt. Then he stepped back a few paces and whipped his hand through the air three times, shooing them away.

Daniel stopped trying to squirm out of his brother's grasp. He halted, confused. "Pa?" he asked.

The callused hand moved like a hatchet across the air. Whip, whip.

"Pa!" Zeke called, his voice reasonable. "Pa, we made it through. Them ghosts didn't come for us. We're all right."

Pa's narrow brown eyes found his. Whip, whip, went the big hand through the air. Whip, whip.

Pa let the cattle and horses out of the barn. He released the chickens. Ma came out on the porch for a while and, looking toward the place where Daniel and Zeke stood, put her hands over her face and cried. Her hair was down. She still had her nightdress on. Pa gathered her up and led her back inside.

"They don't know we're here," Daniel said. "They ain't seen us."

"They seen us, all right, but maybe we look different or something."

Daniel studied his brother. "You look ugly as ever."

Zeke didn't feel like laughing.

"Pa's mad, ain't he?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah."

"When he decides to, he's gonna whup us blind."

Zeke looked down at the silent house and didn't say a thing.

The sun rose higher. Three red chickens pecked in the dirt of the yard. Pa came out with Ma. Ma was dressed in black. Pa set the bay gelding into the traces of the wagon and they rode off to service.

"I'm going on down to get me something to eat." Daniel clambered to his feet and looked down at Zeke expectantly.

Zeke had his arms wrapped around his knees and was staring straight ahead. "You just go ahead, then. I ain't gonna bother stopping you. I'm tired and my hands is all cut up from them bushes. But I'm telling you there's something not right here. There's something real bad wrong."

"With Pa?"

Zeke put his head down on his arms and didn't answer. Daniel stayed on his feet a minute, just to show his big brother he wasn't chicken. When he did sit, he acted casual about it.

After service, Pa and Ma drove up, old Reverend Sorenson, Pete Jones and Hady Miller behind them. They all looked towards the place where Zeke and Daniel waited. Pa seemed startled to see them still there. He sent Ma into the house and shooed them away.

They didn't go.

"Pa!" Zeke called. "I don't think there are no ghosts. I don't think there's no ghosts noplace."

Old Reverend Sorenson said something about Satan. His voice didn't carry.

Pete and Hady got out the deer rifles from their saddles.

"They're going hunting with Pa again," Daniel said.

With a little groan of horror, Zeke grabbed up his brother quick and tried to lead him away. Daniel wriggled out from under his arm and ran across to the grown-ups.

"Danny!" Zeke wailed as he saw the flash of Daniel's feet and the glint of Hady Miller's gun as he set it on his shoulder. To the side Pa put his hands up to his face, gesture more like Ma would have made.

Daniel's head burst open in a spray of pink. It looked like Hady had shot into a melon. Momentum carried him two steps more before he fell in the dust of the yard. Ma banged out the door and Pa caught her. She was shrieking as loud as Zeke was.

Pete Jones put a gouge in a pine tree two feet from where Zeke stood. Peter never had been much of a shot. Zeke ducked under a pine bough, fled a few yards

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An Unfiltered Man

By Robert A. Metzger

Art by Larry Blamire

Black and spongy. Five bristling hairs poked from its center. A wart. Even though I had a great distrust of warts, I tried to keep an open mind, hoping that this one might exhibit some shred of social decency. I doubted it, though.

"Allen," said Nurse Bemeyer, "this is Dr. Christhoffer."

To say the least, I was surprised. I'd encountered many warts throughout my travels, but few that had names, and fewer still that were doctors. This did not look good. Warts were generally bad enough, but experience had long ago taught me to rank doctors at least three notches below a wart. Facing a wart bestowed with a medical degree left me with little hope that this would be a pleasant encounter. I prayed that it wasn't a specialist.

"Pleased to finally meet you," said the wart.

I never saw its lips move when it spoke. Actually, I never even saw its lips. I grudgingly had to admit to myself that this might be a wart that was a cut above the norm. It was then that I realized what the tricky little growth was up to. It was using the body that was attached to it to do its talking. This was pretty damn impressive even for a wart that had remained unscathed after four years of medical school. I realized in an inspirational flash that the wart wanted to remain incognito, and pass off the body growing from it as the real Dr. Christhoffer. It hadn't fooled me, but I'd go along with the charade until I found out what its real plans were.

My eyes decided to focus on the creased, white bearded face that was masquerading as Dr. Christhoffer. His little brown eyes were sunk deep behind rimless bifocals. A roadmap of crisscrossed veins covered his red nose and cheeks. This is not a face I would have chosen, but of course there's no accounting for taste when you're dealing with something from the medical profession.

"I hope I will be able to help you," said Dr. Christhoffer.

I was momentarily confused. I rarely get confused. Then I realized what Dr. Christhoffer was referring to. It's amazing how the little things can slip your mind. I was insane.

Something grabbed my left hand and pumped it vigorously. The grasp was moist. I was not surprised. I'd expect the handshake of a wart to be moist.

"What do you say?" asked Nurse Bemeyer.

"Albacore tuna," mumbled my mouth. I have no

idea why my mouth said that. It's not very intelligent. Perhaps it was hungry again. If the damn thing wasn't drooling, it was eating. I don't know why I brought it along with me.

Nurse Bemeyer and Dr. Christhoffer smiled. Maybe they liked tuna. Perhaps my mouth wasn't the fool I had always thought it was. It might not be a bad idea to listen to it more often.

Dr. Christhoffer's moist fingers slipped from my hand. It was only as his little finger was just sliding away that I felt the hunger, and I'm not talking about tuna cravings. Evil ate deep within him. Squirming worms munched his small intestine in their quest for soft lymph nodes. My mouth seemed to like the doctor, and even though it wasn't the most intelligent organ I had, it was usually a pretty good judge of character. I tossed aside my distrust of warts with medical backgrounds, and reaching with my third hand, the one that only my third eye could see, I reached into Dr. Christhoffer's saggy paunch. I picked out every last one of those cancerous worms, and hurled them to hell. I think it was hell. It might have been Pittsburgh.

"Oh!" said Dr. Christhoffer. He grabbed his stomach, then sighed deeply. Pain which had lurked in the corners of his eyes faded. After breathing deeply several times, a smile came to his face.

"Please take your seats," he told Nurse Bemeyer.

Nurse Bemeyer guided me down a crowded aisle, helping me into a slick leatherette chair. The fatman next to me smelled like garlic.

"May I have your attention?" asked the amplified voice of Dr. Christhoffer.

Both my arms twitched, and the fingers of my left hand danced to a tune that my ears couldn't hear. My not-so-intelligent mouth decided it was time to start drooling, and my nose decided to join in by dripping something thick and sticky over my upper lip.

Nurse Bemeyer wiped my face. When it came to the activities of my mouth and nose, she had what was referred to as job security.

My eyes cooperated and looked toward the front of the auditorium. I'd have to remember to thank them later. The auditorium was large, almost as large as the TV room of the Pennsylvania State Home for the Special Individual. Like the TV room, dozens of people sat facing forward, their eyes glazed, and their jaws slack. There was no TV to hold their attention, and I knew it was certainly not the old-man saggy body attached to Dr. Christhoffer that they found so interesting.



ing. It had to be the electric chair and the washing machine that fascinated them. I also found it interesting. Of course I'd read about it, but I'd never actually seen a washing machine that was sentenced to the electric chair. It must have eaten just one too many socks.

"Colleagues," said Dr. Christhoffer, trying to pry the audience's attention away from the washing machine and to himself, "I have discovered the true function of the brain."

The garlic-drenched fatman next to me burped.

"The brain is not the center of thought," continued Dr. Christhoffer, "but an organ that filters reality."

This didn't make much sense to me. When I was a child, my parents had owned a swimming pool. It was filtered. One cold and crisp morning I reached into the basket which held the debris captured by the filter and pulled out a dead frog. I've never met anyone with a frog in his head, so I can't see how the brain can be much of a filter. I think that the throat filters reality. I've known lots of people who claimed they had frogs in their throats. This wart wasn't as sharp as it thought it was.

"This is reality," said Dr. Christhoffer. He turned to a chalkboard behind him and drew a single powdery white line along its entire length. "And this is how much our brains let us perceive," he said. He drew two close set narrow lines which intersected the center of the reality line. "We all exist between these two lines." For emphasis he smashed his chalk between the lines and was rewarded with a shower of white dust and chalk bits. "However," he said cryptically, "there are a few of us whose filters have drifted slightly, those whose sense of reality has drifted from the norm."

Heads turned and eyes stared at me. The garlic fatman burped again.

Dr. Christhoffer had the old man's body stand as tall as its curved back would allow. "I have discovered the means to realign the mental filter of those who have drifted from the norm."

Turning back to the board, he drew another set of parallel lines slightly to the left of the first set. Above them he wrote two names.

"Two such individuals are Allen Griswold and the late Jack Sweeny."

My ears twitched at hearing the names. I think one of them was mine. I'm not sure which, but I didn't think I was Jack Sweeny. Jack Sweeny was a famous man, and I knew I was not famous. Jack Sweeny had been on TV. His real name was Mr. Sausage. Ten years ago Mr. Sausage had been president of the Clairville Savings and Loan. A little man who Mr. Sausage said lived under his hairpiece told him to kill his family, so Mr. Sausage diced his wife and two sons into little pieces and stuffed them into sausage wrappers. For five days he sold them door to door, making quite a tidy sum until he was caught. It seemed he didn't have a peddler's permit. When caught for this crime, Mr. Sausage explained about the man who lived under his hairpiece, and then slipped into a catatonic state. He never moved or spoke again.

"It was five days ago," said Dr. Christhoffer, "that I reached into the mind of Jack Sweeny and realigned the filter that had shifted the portion of reality he could perceive." He waved his hand over the electric chair and washing machine. "After a single treatment, Jack Sweeny stood from this chair and spoke." A smile filled Dr. Christhoffer's face.

"And dropped dead while clutching a sausage and asking for ketchup!" shouted someone from the audience.

Dr. Christhoffer's eyes narrowed and his cheeks grew even redder than normal. The wart quivered with anger. "Mr. Sweeny's old heart was unable to handle the excitement of being returned to a normal state of mind!" he shouted.

"And the sausage?" asked the same voice.

"A cruel joke," snapped back Dr. Christhoffer. "One of my esteemed colleagues planted it in the poor man's hand during all the confusion." He surveyed the crowd with a hawk-like stare, looking for the culprit. "This time the patient Allen Griswold is in outstanding physical condition, and should have no physical difficulties in coping with being brought back to our limited perception of reality." He motioned towards myself and Nurse Bemeyer. "Please help Allen down," he said.

Nurse Bemeyer prodded my body from the leatherette seat and guided it to the center aisle. I had nothing better to do so I went along for the ride. With a little luck I might even get a look at the convicted washing machine.

"Allen Griswold is an interesting case," said Dr. Christhoffer. "A normal child until the age of 12, he was then struck by lightning, and soon thereafter ran away from home and joined Reverend Smitblight's Traveling Revival Show. It seemed he had obtained the gift of healing."

I saw Dr. Christhoffer gently touch his stomach. The garlic fatman burped in disbelief. The audience of esteemed colleagues mumbled in unison.

"I understand your skepticism," said Dr. Christhoffer in not-very-understanding tones. "But this is exactly the type of phenomenon that we should expect to see from someone whose mental filter is shifting. They now perceive a reality that we cannot see. In this altered reality other things may be possible, things we consider impossible."

The audience did not seem impressed. The garlic fatman burped twice.

"Unfortunately, his mental filter drifted even further, and he soon had difficulty communicating both with other people and even his own body."

That was ludicrous. I communicate just fine. It's just that nothing seems to listen; especially my mouth.

"Albacore tuna," shouted my mouth, just to prove the point.

"The procedure that I will employ to realign Allen's mental filter is actually quite simple," said the doctor. "By attaching Allen to the Reality Monitor I will remove every vestige of the misaligned mental

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A Report from Our Alien Publisher

(Taken from ABO No. 1)

Introduction and status

Please forgive me for what will seem an inordinate delay in the filing of my first report, not to mention this unwelcome interruption in J. R. Ewing's remarks to Sue Ellen. Our communication system has failed, and I am forced to file this report in the form of a decisecond burst which appears to most viewers as an interlude in which J. R. clears his throat. I chose this one as the broadcast most likely to receive intense scrutiny in your studies of Earth radio signals. It is monitored quite closely by most human beings, so I assume you would devote commensurate study to it.

I suppose some explanation is in order. Not having heard from me for more than 24 years, you must have assumed I was dead. I assure you, however, that I am alive and filing this report, as agreed, during the first Earth year of my arrival. Unfortunately, interactive communication is out of the question. The vent is permanently closed to me, since my diode was damaged shortly after my arrival in a place called Des Moines. It appears to still transmit, but there is no response. It was crushed by a native. Mashed in the street where I had dropped it by the creature's 195/60R15 steel-belted radial appendage. I see now that it was unwise to have attempted conversation with a 5.0 liter V8, but my pre-transition briefings had made no reference to this creature's obvious insensitivity.

In fact, there is a lot of information that did not get into the pre-transition briefings. It was only later, after the encounter, that I learned the meaning of the expres-

sion "nut", by which the 5.0 liter V8 addressed me just before crushing the diode, when it instructed me to leave the roadway. I first supposed it was a respectful form of address, since it was accompanied by the smell of burning polymers. It is not a term of respect, although knowing its actual definition, I cannot understand how it has acquired an abusive connotation. You can see for yourself, however, in the report appendix labeled "Slang Dictionary."

Other than my run-in with the 5.0 liter, there was nothing untoward in my arrival. The rephasing reaction, I learned later, created a system-wide energy imbalance, but the only sign of it was the dimming of something called "Comet Halley" which appears periodically to the Earth creatures. You needn't worry over their suspicions, however. Few of the creatures here now were alive when this comet last appeared, and therefore hardly any of them know what it is supposed to look like. Among the human beings, there were reports and legends handed down by those who had seen it during its last appearance, but most people assume their ancestors were exaggerating.

Report on Creatures of Full Consciousness

This first report, then, will describe all the Earth creatures that have attained full consciousness. Unfortunately, there aren't any.

There are many sapient forms on this planet, the foremost being (as we had suspected from the television broadcasts) the human beings. (Incidentally, our second most likely candidates for consciousness, the Muppets, have been a disap-

pointment as well.) The human beings have actually attained a certain level of self-awareness. But as you know, consciousness consists both of self-awareness and awareness of others. By the latter measure, human beings emit no more deeply than the non-sapient 5.0 liter V8 that crushed the diode in Des Moines.

I think the disabled emotionality of human beings is a result of the fact that they have not yet discovered the spectrum of sentience. I know you would be no more surprised if I told you they hadn't yet made a connection between sexual activity and reproduction. But it is true. They lack the vaguest notion of the sentience that invests all matter from the smallest molecule to the largest galaxy. They actually believe that the stars behave the way they do as a result of something called "nature" rather than by choice. How do they explain binaries, novae, pulsars, and singularities, you say? Don't even ask.

Human Fiction

Among the 100 appendices attached to this report are several specimens of "fiction," which were prepared by human beings. They are included to give you an insight into the minds of creatures who actually manage to function in their environment without any awareness of the sentience spectrum. These "fictions" are like the television shows we are so used to from our monitoring of Earth radio signals, except that they are in the form of print. This print gives the viewer an opportunity to decode them and enhance them with personal imagi-

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Unfiltered Man

(Continued from page 66)

filter he presently has. In this state, the true nature of reality will pour into his brain."

The wart quivered with what I could only construe as pure delight.

"The human mind, being incapable of viewing true reality, will throw back up its filter, but ..." He held up an extended bony finger to drive home the point. "This filter will now conform to our norm. The consciousness of the audience will force the filter to align to our narrow band of reality. Allen Griswald will be cured!"

An uproar filled the audience. Several people laughed. The garlic fatman let out a record-setting three burps. But I noticed hardly any of this. My body had sat in the electric chair, and my eyes were now looking at the washing machine. My eyes were being most cooperative today.

Dr. Christhofer walked to the washing machine and lifted up the lid. I didn't see a load of laundry anywhere. It was then that I realized he must be taking out a load. Reaching in and rummaging around, he pulled out a football helmet to which was attached the longest strands of noodles I had ever seen. No matter how far he pulled out the helmet I couldn't see the end of a single piece. I hoped Mrs. Christhofer wasn't in the audience to see the sort of things her husband tried to put in the washing machine.

He slipped the football helmet over my head.

"All I need do is activate the master switch, and in a few moments Allen will be cured."

The audience sat quietly at this proclamation. I might have heard half a burp, or it might have been my ears popping and playing tricks on me. Dr. Christhofer set the washing machine to rinse and pushed in the knob. Nobody starts washing clothes on the rinse cycle I thought. It was the last thing I thought. My head exploded.

I looked through a fishbowl.

The barn swallow cocked its head. "It's really quite simple, Allen, reality is a single continuous relationship. It's little more than a single equation with user-defined boundary conditions and an infinite number of solutions." Its brown beak pecked for hidden mites beneath its wing feathers.

"I don't understand," I chirped in barn swallow. It was the least I could do since the bird was kind enough to talk to me in English.

A gassy maelstrom belched gravity waves. "Of course you don't," said the quasar. "The filter still remains. Let me help you," it said.

I drifted through a radiation sea. The quasar gobbled two red giants, a neutron star and topped off its meal with pulsar. Like the garlic fat man, it burped, but what it burped was hard gamma rays.

The fishbowl over my face crazed.

"It's so simple," said the old samurai. "Reality is what you make it. If the mind wills it, the fabric of reality will conform to it."

I bowed to the warrior and was rewarded with a

smashing blow of his sword. I heard glass break.

"It is will alone that dictates reality," roared Thor. His biceps bulging, he swung his hammer in a double-handed grasp over his head. "Will it," he bellowed. The hammer crashed into my fishbowl helmet. A chink of glass flew before my face. A hard light of infinite colors poured into my eyes.

"Do you understand now?" asked the Tin Man. "Have you got the heart to use your mind?"

I nodded, my head rattling in the cracked and broken fishbowl.

"Then take heart!" he yelled, his jaw locking open as he screamed. A swing of his axe ripped the top of the fishbowl cleanly off my head. My brain sizzled.

"You're almost there now," said the cyclops. A single red eye stared into my face. "Can you see the equation? Feel the fabric of reality." It smashed my face with a tree-stump club. Glass shattered.

I picked myself up from the stone floor. Only the lip of the fishbowl hung around my neck.

"May I help you, sire?" asked the silver princess.

Floating above the floor, her white slippers too pure to touch the earth, she hovered before me. "The last slivers of the filter remain," she said. "If I remove it, your mind will define reality. Nothing will bind you." Her delicate fingers caressed the glass ring around my throat.

"Dr. Christhofer said that a filter directed by the consciousness of the audience would fill my mind," I told her.

"Only if you will it," said the princess. "You are now reality. Define yourself." She kissed my cheek gently, then lifted the glass collar over my head.

Nothing obstructed my vision.

"Can you hear me, Allen?" asked Dr. Christhofer.

I opened my eyes. Reaching up with hands that answered my brain, I removed the helmet. I stood.

The audience remained speechless. Not even a burp could be heard.

"Albacore tuna," I whispered.

"What did you say?" asked the doctor.

I looked into his face. He knew what I had said.

"Albacore tuna!" I shouted.

The auditorium shook. Dust rained down from the ceiling. A breeze pushed the hair off my forehead. I could smell the sea, and hear the crack of waves. The sounds of pounding surf poured from the room's loudspeakers.

"Albacore tuna!" I roared. Fish exploded from the air. Flopping and squirming, gills pumping out remaining sea-water, tunas slithered across the floor.

"Care for some mayo with your tuna?" I asked Doctor Christhofer.

Color drained from the old man's face. He sagged gently to the floor, which was now covered in wavy-white mayonnaise.

Far up in the auditorium the garlic fatman burped convulsively.

I never would have believed it, but the wart had cured me of my insanity. This was going to be fun.

— ABO —



Blamino 87

Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 67)

nation. It is a clever way to increase the interactivity of the story-viewing experience, and I am sure print will eventually grow to be a medium of great importance in Earth communications, perhaps surpassing television one day. We should consider developing a version of the technique.

When you review the appendix items, you will see that some of the human beings come closer to seeing the sentience spectrum than others. Note, in particular, the items titled *The Veda* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. By and large, however, human beings believe that sentience is a limited commodity (some of them even refer to it as a gift), and the most thoughtless of them believe it is not shared by any creatures outside of humanity! There is also even a small minority made up of two groups, one called "psychotics" and the other called "behaviorists," who seem to think that consciousness is limited to themselves. But the rest of humanity recognizes the risk in this viewpoint and has taken steps to render these individuals less dangerous by either locking them up or giving them university appointments.

You will understand the appendix items much better if you know that this quaint notion of sentience being a human gift has been a major theme of their cosmology. Among the many separate cultures that inhabit this planet, the rule is for the members of any tribe to consider themselves "people" and outsiders

as "others." This belief is predominant in the small and weak groups among them (whom the rest call "primitives" or "aborigines") where it does little harm. But it takes hold among stronger groups periodically, with devastating effects. The last major such sickness took place in a region called "Germany" just about 50 Earth years ago (see the appendix item entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*), but another plague with more mystical overtones seems to be incubating in a place called the "Middle East."

Even those who acknowledge the sentience of other human beings cannot stretch their imaginations to acknowledge the sentience of all matter. Any time a group of human being sets up a settlement some place, the group members create stories which depict that place as the center of the Earth. This notion reached its ultimate expression about four hundred years ago, when the educated among them generalized the belief to the principle that the Earth was the center of the cosmos. See the appendix item titled the *Almagest*. It was symbolic of their basic belief that human beings were the very purpose of the universe, a belief they still adhere to, despite their vaunted efforts at communication with extraterrestrial intelligence and a small movement dedicated to securing the rights of animals.

I advise you to review the appendix items carefully. A better understanding of human beings will be necessary for you to benefit from my subsequent reports. Each of

these reports will include additional appendices, especially more fictions.

I have located myself in a place called Memphis, Tennessee. It is unbearably frigid, but at least it is humid, which helps to hold what little heat there is. I know I would find a tropical location much more conducive to good health, but I can study most efficiently among the human group called Americans. And I can study Americans most efficiently in this Memphis place.

I have become very partial to a speculative type of work called science fiction. Some of this speculative material almost shows an awareness, sometimes, of the sentience spectrum and therefore gives me hope for human beings.

This hope is something that sustains me. You will see among the appendix items a work called *Robinson Crusoe*. It is a book, written by an English human being over 200 Earth years ago, which describes a man who endured prolonged isolation with only a herd of goats and a servant for companionship. It comes reasonably close to conveying how I feel on this planet with the space vent closed and all hope of a return to Aris lost. The difference between me and Crusoe, of course, is that I have no servant. Often I have no hope, either.

My next burst will be placed on "The Tonight Show," disguised as the momentary mental lapse of a guest who wrote a book on memory improvement. It is entirely too human, I know, but I think the man is a fraud and could not resist the temptation.

— ABO —

Brothers

(Continued from page 63)

into the forest and stopped, bewildered. There was no other place he could go. Turned out like he was, there were no other people who would take him in.

Pete and Hady were out on the porch. Pa, Ma and Reverend Sorenson had gone inside. Daniel lay sprawled in the yard, his legs twisted as if he were still running.

The space captain would help him, if only Zeke could wait the six months till he came back. Zeke guessed he probably couldn't make it. He thought about living out in the wild without Daniel. He thought about hunger. He thought about cold.

Daniel had died in ignorance, but Zeke decided he wouldn't. He didn't want to die by chance, either. Chance might be a whole lot worse. He and Daniel had done something they shouldn't have, and, one way or another, they were going to pay. Zeke was old enough to understand the relationship between God and man; between man and boy.

He stepped out from behind the tree and started down in a steady walk towards the yard. Hady — thank God it was Hady — raised his rifle and sighted slow.

— ABO —

Why Aboriginal SF?

(Taken from ABO No. 1)

By Charles C. Ryan

Why have we called our new magazine *Aboriginal SF*? After all, "aboriginal" means native or indigenous. It can also mean first or original, or pertaining to aborigines. And in some circles it has come to mean primitive or backward. So why *Aboriginal SF*?

Part of the answer can be read on page 67 — the essay by our alien publisher.

Yup. Alien: as in first contact; as in an extraterrestrial, a visitor from another planet in a solar system 18 light years from Earth; as in BEM (bug-eyed monster). Alien.

We know that may be hard to swallow. It was for us, at first. And it was for the Pentagon. We went to them when we stumbled on the alien's signal in one of those serendipitous, looking-for-something-else accidents that make scientific research so much fun. But the Pentagon thought we were nuts and referred us to a UFO society. Even the UFOites didn't believe us. The scientists at SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) just laughed and told us we should write science fiction. (What the heck, Carl Sagan did.)

So, here we are.

One reason no one believed us is that the alien's signal is traveling in the wrong direction. We weren't scanning the heavens for astronomical events, or looking for a new star to name after ourselves. We weren't looking for a signal at all, which, we suppose, is how we found it. As best as we can tell from our sketchy translation of its language, our alien is some sort of cultural anthropologist and it is beaming selections of Earth's culture back to its home system (more about that later). And it seems to have developed a fondness for

science fiction, which comprises much of the literature it has decided to collect.

We theorize that the alien has found a way of tapping into our communications systems and, even more importantly, into our computers — all of them. How? Ask any computer buff. Computers emit radio signals. Computers sold to the government which might be used on classified material have to meet a "tempest" rating so no signals will leak. Commercial computers have to be shielded to meet FCC (Federal Communications Commission) regulations to prevent them from interfering with radio and television signals. Apparently that shielding isn't good enough. We say that because, in addition to much published literature, we discovered a great deal of unpublished work in the alien's signal. Including all of the short stories in this issue. Our alien is tapping into the computers used by writers for word processing and is stealing their material.

With all that data sitting in our hands we decided to capitalize on it and this magazine is the result. Unlike the alien, who is an outright plagiarist and thief, we contacted the authors of the stories in this issue and paid them.

We haven't the faintest idea of what our publisher looks like, either in its alien form or in the human guise it has adopted. The alien broadcasts its signal on a monthly basis, and as soon as we can arrange it, we will bring you the translations at the same interval. But for technical reasons our translations will have to remain bimonthly for a few issues.

Now that you've read the

Publisher's Note, you have an idea why we chose our name. To it, we are aborigines — all of us on Earth. It makes sense. As dumb as the alien appears to be about some things (when was the last time you tried to talk to a 1986 5.0 liter V-8 Ford Mustang?), it has that edge. Any creature capable of crossing interstellar distances would have to consider Earthlings aborigines and somewhat backward and primitive by comparison.

Don't let it get you down, though. It was bound to happen sooner or later. And there is power in a name. Read a little about the aborigines of Australia. They have power. The power to commune with nature. The power of dream time. The real secret of power is to take something perceived as a weakness and turn it into a strength. And after all, isn't that what science fiction is? Our dream time? Our chance to explore "What if?" to the fullest?

An aborigine doesn't lack intelligence, only knowledge and experience. In many ways they are more capable in their own environment than the supposedly civilized whites who dubbed them aborigines in the first place. It's unlikely any of us, for instance, could survive in the Australian outback with nothing but a loincloth. Even though we are the last ones to be apologists for the human race (we have our own list of shortcomings), this alien comes off a bit high and mighty commenting on our sentience level. It is selling us short. In a sense it is doing what some of the less thoughtful of us do when we assume the handicapped in our society live less than full lives because of an impaired sense of sight or hearing. No way. Any lack

(Continued to page 79)

Passing

By Elaine Radford

Art by Leslie Pardew

Sometimes Susan tries to touch the transmitter in her head, tries to work out where it is in her brain. She knows, of course, that it's in her cortex, in her (to be precise) left occipital lobe, but that isn't what she means. She's trying to *feel* it in there, as if that sliver small as a dust mote could actually impact upon her nerves. As if those famously numb brain cells could detect sensation.

Most of the time though, she concentrates on passing as a human, a not impossible chore since, after all, the body she wears was cloned from genuine Earth humanoid cells. (Her brain too, for that matter.) Biologically speaking, she's a Terran ape down to her last gene; the transmitter doesn't affect that.

The transmitter doesn't affect anything. It just sits there and watches. And sends.

Susan's duty is to be a human. She'll keep at it until she dies. Or until the transmitter does. Unlikely that: the transmitters are designed with average lifespans five times that of a human. There are no provisions for retrieving Susan if the transmitter for some reason fails while she is still alive. She will then simply become functionless.

So sometimes Susan thinks about the unfairness of the system, for it isn't inconceivable that the instrument could die for some reason beyond her control. When she catches herself worrying at the idea, she snatches herself back to the present in a hurry, so that she can concentrate once more on being human.

After all, those thoughts are being beamed home just like all her others, and she'd rather not have too many grumblings on record. Not that her people don't allow complaint or even downright dissent, you understand. Nor is it that an expensive interstellar mission is likely to swoop down to recall or brainwash a resentful agent. It's simply that she hates being perceived as whiny.

Today she sits at her desk and stares out the window at the jam-up on the bridge over the river when the Merxen comes into the room. His name is Tom; she secretly nicknamed him Merxen because that's what he looks like: an awkward conglomeration of large slabs of meat stuffed into a business suit. Like her, he's an accountant.

"*A what?*" she'd exclaimed when they proudly told her where she was going to be inserted into the culture. "*I'm going to be a what?*"

(But I don't know anything about accounting,"

she protested, staring her glossy-scaled mentor in its third eye.

"Neither do the graduates of the university you're supposed to have attended," it replied.)

"I don't have anything to do," the Merxen complained.

"Neither do I," Susan agreed, pushing her papers aside. "I was trying to look busy to keep Jack off my back. I wanna sneak out early this afternoon."

"Heavy date, huh?" He leered. Susan had noticed that men in business suits often felt obliged to leer. It was too bad about Tom, who otherwise was an agreeable enough sort, by which she meant (as she assumed humans did) that he never did anything sufficiently interesting to annoy anyone.

"Maybe," she said, smiling dutifully. (Women in business suits were obliged to smile.)

"Thought I'd mention that some of the guys are going over to the Cajun Cache after work. They're having an alligator tasting."

Women, in any dress, were obliged to wince at the very idea of consuming reptiles. Susan did so, quite realistically actually, since in her upbringing if not her genes she was akin to some rather large reptiles herself.

"Ah, don't look like that. It'll be fun."

"But thank God, I'm otherwise occupied. The date, you know. I don't think he's much for 'gator meat."

The date, whom she later met in front of her office building, was called Richard. She'd secretly nicknamed him Singerpeltn, after the slender natives of the next to innermost planet of Epsilon Eridani. He was tall and thin, all skin and angles, a Singerpeltn after a heavy molt.

"Where shall we eat tonight?" he asked.

"Dunno... We had an invite to munch 'gator..."

"Gah." He made a face. "I'll be glad when that fad's past."

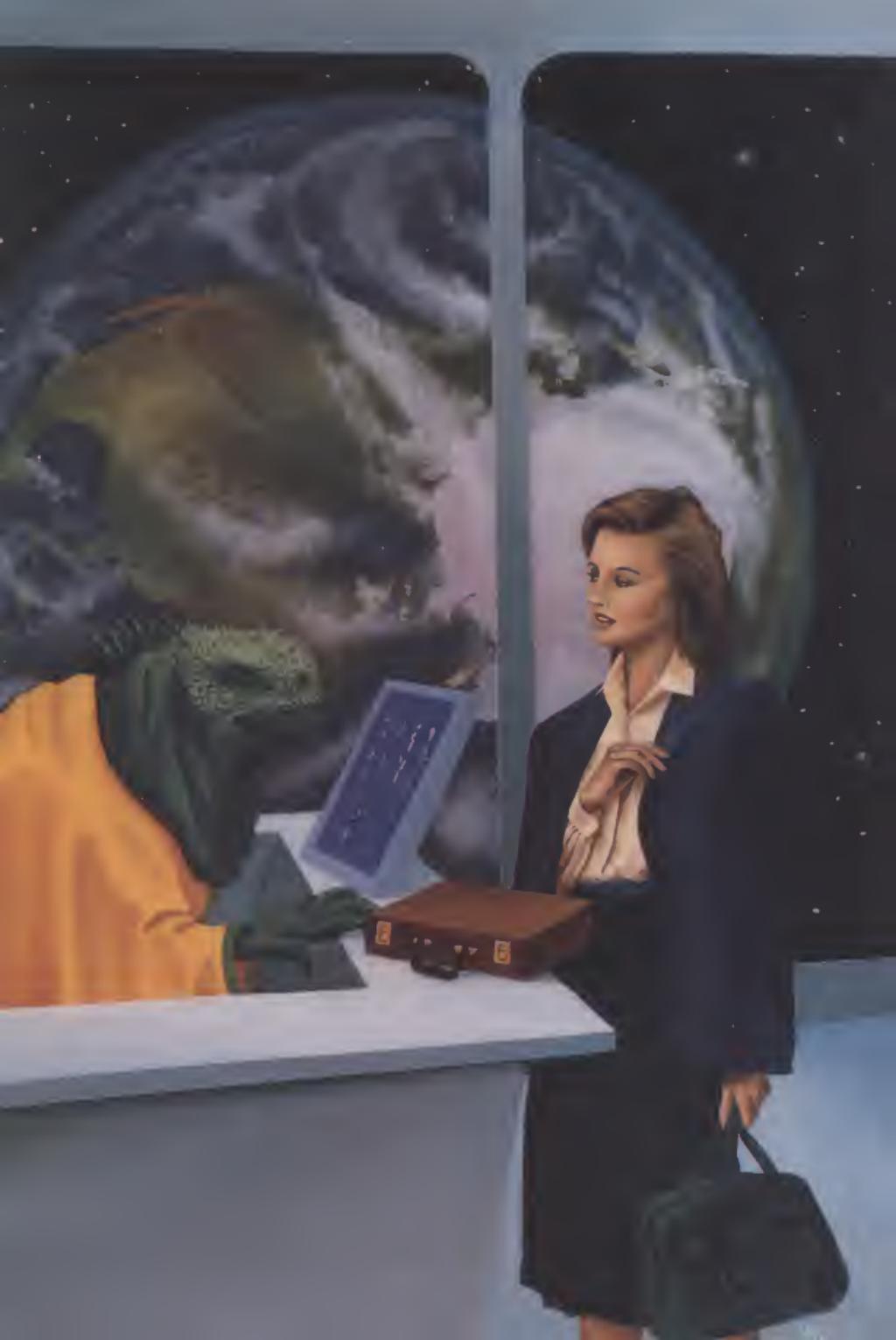
"I don't think it'll be much longer."

They had nothing else to exchange about each other's day. They ended up in a fast food place that was neither fast nor a purveyor of food. Susan picked at the plastic on her plate without enthusiasm.

"You on another diet?" the Singerpeltn asked.

"One day there's gonna be a good wind and it's gonna pick you up and blow you away."

Nevertheless women were obliged to diet. Susan



seized happily on the excuse not to eat. "I was two pounds over this morning," she said.

"Two pounds. Those old scales aren't accurate to within two pounds."

"I know. That's why I don't wanna new one. Get one of those digital read-outs and whatever it says, kid, that's what you weigh. With the old one, I can always say it's off or weighing too heavy or something."

That was dinner.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and hopes that she's sending back the right kind of data. Not that she has much control over it. Whatever happens to her, whatever she feels, that's what gets sent. Nevertheless. It seems her life is too exciting sometimes. They'd wanted someone to study the everyday life of the Earth human, a distillation of the typical creature's existence. Nothing flashy, none of your rock stars and great leaders. Just something simple, humdrum. An accountant's life.

Yet her existence is nothing if not filled with danger, suspense, victory, and defeat. Last night, for instance, she and Richard were almost killed by a speeding automobile. The day before, she'd met a Wing-by — she called him that because he was little and fluttery like the sentient birds of the planet MNelli — and the Wing-by had confided that he killed people for a hobby. (Also a living, she suspected; he paid for her drinks, dinner, everything with cash instead of the little plastic cards that respectable citizens used.) Anyway, he claimed that he belonged to a whole club of men that traveled around the country killing people.

"Why?" she asked.

"So that no one will know who I am." He pushed back his plate and crossed knife and fork across it. "There isn't a soul alive who knows who I am."

"Who are you?" she asked.

He whispered in her ear. "I'm an alien from outer space."

It was the last thing she expected. "No kidding! Where are you from?"

"It's a secret," he said. "You know too much already. You'll have to die."

"But it's OK. I'm one too."

"Oh, sure. That's what they all say."

Then, later, when they were alone at the lakefront, he'd taken out his knife and drawn it up to Susan's throat. She wished heartily she possessed one of those impenetrable hides that aliens have on TV. Or maybe a B-movie laser gun.

Just then a pick-up came speeding round the bend, its lights chopping the lake like knives. The Wing-by froze, pinned like a deer by the headlights, and Susan jerked backwards and out of the car. "Help!" she cried, dashing directly into the path of the truck. "He's going to kill me!" The truck swerved dangerously, its left tires kicking dirt, before zooming around her back into the night. Susan couldn't think about her inexplicable abandonment. The Wing-by was already chasing her, calling like a concerned lover.

"What's the matter with you, you crazy? You

could get yourself squashed flat pulling that shit..."

Susan ran, her heart shrieking, over the levee and down to the near building of the little college campus on the other side. "Help me," she screamed, not knowing that she was screaming. "For God's sake, help me!" When she reached the safety of the building, the students refused to look at her.

Then, later, she'd had a fight with Richard about where she'd been. Imagine, one adult yelling at another because she hadn't told him where she was going.

Their art was like that too; their most highly regarded drama revolved about people yelling, screaming, and shrieking at one another, while their lesser efforts dealt with the physical violence of killing, raping, bombing. Their trash was about sex and love. Only their myths concerned peace and contentment, and that in such a coercive, sullen package it was obvious that the Earth humans resented the very idea.

So it wasn't unlikely that Susan's experiences might very well be typical. She shivers. If an accountant's life is what these Earth humans call dull, she's deeply grateful she wasn't assigned the role of rock star. Or great leader.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and wonders if she could manage to have it removed. After all, she's an Earth ape now, destined never to leave this planet again, and anyway her body and brain are constructed of the very stuff of this planet. Only her culture, a thin layer barely concealing the animal within (or so the Earth books tell her), differentiates her from any other suited ape.

Her culture and her transmitter. Sometimes she resents the fact that she's forced to spy upon her own people. Sometimes she doesn't know who her own people are.

At lunch the Merxen keeps glancing uneasily over her shoulder. At last he swallows some courage in his wine and says, "Do you realize there's a man following you?"

"How can anyone be following me? I'm just sitting here," Susan said sensibly.

"Well, so's he, *now*." The Merxen twisted his weightlifter's face nervously. "But he was waiting outside the office and then he followed us in here and now he's even ordered what you're having."

"Coincidence." But she feinted a half-turn, stopped only by the Merxen's restraining hand. "Don't look. I don't want him to know we've spotted him. Maybe you can get an unobtrusive glance at him if you make like you're going to the ladies' room."

Susan can hardly imagine how she can "make like" she's going to the ladies' room without actually going there, so she abandons her warm plate with a sigh. At the restroom door, she pauses and flicks her eyes surreptitiously to the side. She sees the watcher. It is the Wing-by. Susan sighs again and enters the ladies'.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and wonders why. Is her life any different than it would have been without it? Her childhood and

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adolescence differed, true, but now that they've faded into memory and her papers are in order, she can scarcely believe she spent her first twenty-some years in orbit. She seems perfectly interchangeable with any number of other accountants or even financial advisors, her secret true function an irrelevance. It hardly seems enough merely to live and to think, even if an advanced civilization is assiduously scanning your thoughts.

What's it all for, she wonders, stunned by the banality of her alien-schooled mind.

Walking down to the bus stop after work, Susan is accosted by a drunk who strongly resembles a ghost-like Ememe. He tries to grab her right breast. Susan hits him with a briefcase; she's upset. How dare he? And she in her business suit...!

(Later she is pleased, certain her outrage is as real as an Earthborn human's.)

"Lady," a stranger says, blowing a cloud of white tobacco smoke through twin nostrils strikingly like a Yanim's. "There's a man calling you, I think..."

Susan turns, annoyed. Sure enough, it's the Wing-by. He's getting to be a nuisance. She hops in whatever bus happened to be parked at the stop and rides several miles out of her way.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and imagines it being a receiver as well. She gets so lonely, trying to pass as a human. Despite the plethora of books, movies, and TV programs she's studied on the topic, she finds herself surprisingly ill-equipped to handle the reality of being stalked by a crazed killer. She wonders how the Earth people stay so calm. They're used to it, she supposes. She can't talk to these smooth-faced aliens with their scaleless faces; she wishes her old mentor could beam some reassuring phrase into her skull, even if only a word, a fraction of a word, a sigh. Her people's sighs contained so much meaning...

She meets Richard the Singerpeltn for dinner and talks about nothing to him. They exchange stories about their jobs, about the weather. Susan sees the Wing-by sitting in a dark corner of the restaurant glaring fiercely at a plate of chow mein. No one eats chow mein any more, especially not in Chinese restaurants. The Wing-by is remarkably ill-informed for an alien spy. Susan decides not to mention his existence to Richard.

They're walking to the car together, she and the Singerpeltn, the Wing-by trailing behind. A brave star or two winks through the city haze. Probably not stars, Susan decides, but planets. She drops her gaze from heaven in time to catch the Singerpeltn wrenching a knife from the Wing-by's hand. Richard brandishes his new-won weapon fiercely; he's watched all the programs too. "Now get lost," he said. "And fast. Before I get mad and decide to sic the cops on your ass."

The Wing-by fluttered backward, spitting at the ground. "I'll git her," he said. "You can't stand guard over her forever."

"Lord," the Singerpeltn muttered. Then his eyes flashed at Susan. "You know that schizoid?"

She nodded, looking away from his anger.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He thinks I'm going to tell the world his big secret."

"Oh?"

"He's an alien spy from outer space. Sent down in human form for an in-depth study of life on Earth."

Richard snorted. "Aren't we all?" he said.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her brain and wonders if it's there at all. She can't seem to pinpoint its image anywhere in her skull. Maybe the whole situation is all in her head.

Well, of course. One way or another, it's certainly all in her head. Somewhere in space, from almost a light year away the ship is reading her thoughts, studying them as if they were of intense importance and interest, although the ship will not return in her lifetime. There is no faster-than-light travel. There is no ship. There are no aliens from outer space. Or if there are, it makes no difference anyway.

The sun is coming up over the levee and the Singerpeltn turns restlessly in his sleep, dreaming, Susan thinks, of other worlds. But there are no other worlds. There are no suns. There are only neurons firing in a brain.

The Wing-by is climbing the fire escape, his face reckless with fury. No one who knows who he is has ever eluded him for this long. Susan watches him approach and locks the windows and doors. She dials the police. "There's a man outside my house. He's going to break in," she says.

The woman at the other end of the line sighs. "Do you know who it is, hon? Have you ever seen this man before?"

"Of course not," Susan says, but not fast enough to fool the police officer. Even though the woman takes her address and phone number, her tone says clearly that she thinks Susan is wasting her time.

"A car will be out," the officer says, in a voice saying clearly that no car will be sent. Susan hangs up and looks around. The Wing-by is at the window, slashing at the screen with his knife.

"Richard," she says, shaking his shoulder.

"Richard, wake up."

He opens an eye, then jerks up abruptly. "Call the police, I'll find a weapon."

"I already called."

"Oh, good."

"Maybe we should just leave the other way."

"Oh. OK." He sounds disappointed at not getting another opportunity to display his usefulness to Susan.

They leave by the front. Susan thinks about moving, about what a nuisance all that will be. She fantasizes briefly about killing the Wing-by; then she wouldn't have to bother. She fantasizes in more detail about Richard doing it. Then she wouldn't be inconvenienced at all.

"We're going down to the station and having something done about this loon. Obviously, he's some kind of psycho."

Susan nods. They get to the car. Behind them, footsteps. They turn and see that this time the Wing-by's got a gun. He's smiling.

"Alien asshole!" Susan screams as she and the



Singerpeltn leap into the car and screech away. A bullet whizzes by the righthand mirror. "You missed!" Susan croaks loudly.

"I don't know who's crazier," Richard says. "You or him. Or me, for getting mixed up with somebody who gets mixed up with people like that."

"Aliens," Susan replies unthinkingly. "Aliens like that."

"People, aliens, what's the difference?" Richard says. He looks tired. His dreams haven't been restful.

"I've been asking myself that very question," Susan says.

Behind them the Wing-by runs out of bullets and fades away. They never see him again.

Sometimes Susan thinks about the transmitter in her head and tries to remember where she got such an odd idea. People would think she was crazy if they knew. In the afternoon, Richard asks her to marry him, and she agrees. They will live happily ever after and always narrowly escape the bullets from psychotic guns. In the evening, they shop for rings and eat a candlelight dinner.

In the morning, Richard tells her he has a secret he really must share. He is an alien from outer space, sent to spy upon the people of Earth, etc.

Susan laughs. It is as she didn't dare allow herself to suspect. There are no spaceships nor Wing-by's nor transmitters in writhing skulls, but most of all there are no Earth people. "Like you said," she says. "Aren't we all?"

— ABO —

Prior Restraint

(Continued from page 11)

the screenplay. You will give us the original."

I wasn't in the mood for this. I started closing the door.

"You have so much taste," I said. I didn't care how they got the script, not then. I just wanted to find a way to sleep until when I woke up the boy would still be alive.

They pushed the door open and came in. "You see, Mr. Murphy, until we altered your car yesterday, your path and the boy's never did intersect. We had to try four times to get the timing right, but we finally made it. It's the nice thing about time travel. If you blow it, you can always go back and get it right the next time."

I couldn't believe anyone would want to take credit for the boy's death. "What for?" I asked.

And they told me. Seems the boy was even more talented than anyone thought. He was going to grow up and be a writer. A journalist and critic. And he was going to cause a lot of problems for a particular government some forty years down the line. He was especially going to write three books that would change the whole way of thinking of a large number of people. The wrong way.

"We're all writers ourselves," Meek says to me. "It shouldn't surprise you that we take our writing very seriously. More seriously than you do. Writers, the good writers, can change people. And some of the changes aren't very good. By killing that boy yesterday, you see, you stopped a bloody civil war some sixty years from now. We've already checked and there are some unpleasant side effects, but nothing that can't be coped with. Saved seven million lives. You shouldn't feel bad about it."

I remembered the things they had known about me. Things that nobody could have known. I felt stupid because I began to believe they might be for real. I felt afraid because they were calm when they talked of the boy's death. I asked, "Where do I come in? Why me?"

"Oh, it's simple. You're a very good writer. Destined to be the best of your age. Fiction. And this screenplay. In three hundred years they're going to compare you to Shakespeare and the poor old bard will lose. The trouble is, Murphy, you're a godawful hedonist and a pessimist to boot, and if we can just keep you from publishing anything, the whole artistic mood of two centuries will be brightened considerably. Not to mention the prevention of a famine in seventy years. History makes strange connections, Murphy, and you're at the heart of a lot of suffering. If you never publish, the world will be a much better place for everyone."

You weren't there, you didn't hear them. You didn't see them, sitting on my couch, legs crossed, nodding, gesturing like they were saying the most natural thing in the world. From them I learned how to write genuine insanity. Not somebody frothing at the mouth; just somebody sitting there like a good friend, saying impossible things, cruel things, and smiling and getting excited and — Jesus, you don't know. Because I believed them. They knew, you see. And they were *too* insane, even a madman could have come up with a better hoax than that. And I'm making it sound as if I believed them logically, but I didn't, I don't think I can persuade you, either, but trust me—if I know when a man is bluffing or telling the truth, and I do, these two were not bluffing. A child had died, and they knew how many times I had turned the key in the ignition. And there was truth in those terrible eyes when Meek said, "If you willingly refrain from publishing, you will be allowed to live. If you refuse, then you will die within three days. Another writer will kill you — accidentally, of course. We only have authority to work through authors."

I asked them why. The answer made me laugh. It seems they were from the Authors' Guild. "It's a matter of responsibility. If you refuse to take responsibility for the future consequences of your acts, we'll have to give the responsibility to somebody else."

And so I asked them why they didn't just kill me in the first place instead of wasting time talking

to me.

It was Tree who answered, and the bastard was crying, and he says to me, "Because we love you. We love everything you write. We've learned everything we know about writing from you. And we'll lose it if you die."

They tried to console me by telling me what good company I was in. Thomas Hardy — they made him give up novels and stick to poetry which nobody read and so it was safe. Meek tells me, "Hemingway decided to kill himself instead of waiting for us to do it. And there are some others who only had to refrain from writing a particular book. It hurt them, but Fitzgerald was still able to have a decent career with the other books he could write, and Perelman gave it to us in laughs, since he couldn't be allowed to write his real work. We only bother with great writers. Bad writers aren't a threat to anybody."

We struck a sort of bargain. I could go on writing. But after I had finished everything, I had to burn it. All but the first three pages. "If you finish it at all," says Meek, "we'll have a copy of it here. There's a library here that — uh, I guess the easiest way to say it is that it exists outside time. You'll be published, in a way. Just not in your own time. Not for about eight hundred years. But at least you can write. There are others who have to keep their pens completely still. It breaks our hearts, you know."

I knew all about broken hearts, yes sir, I knew all about it. I burned all but the first three pages.

There's only one reason for a writer to quit writing, and that's when the Censorship Board gets

to him. Anybody else who quits is just a gold-plated jackass. "Swap" Morris doesn't even know what real censorship is. It doesn't happen in libraries. It happens on the hoods of cars. So go on, become a real estate broker, sell insurance, follow Santa Claus and clean up the reindeer poo, I don't give a damn. But if you give up something that I will never have, I'm through with you. There's nothing in you for me.

So I write. And Doc reads it and tears it to pieces; everything except this. This he'll never see. This he'd probably kill me for, but what the hell? It'll never get published. No, no, I'm too vain. You're reading it, aren't you? See how I put my ego on the line? If I'm really a good enough writer, if my work is important enough to change the world, then a couple of guys in business suits will come make me a proposition I can't refuse, and you won't read this at all, but you are reading it, aren't you? Why am I doing this to myself? Maybe I'm hoping they'll come and give me an excuse to quit writing now, before I find out that I've already written as well as I'm ever going to. But here I thumb my nose at those goddam future critics and they ignore me, they tell exactly what my work is worth.

Or maybe not. Maybe I really *am* good, but my work just happens to have a positive effect, happens not to make any unpleasant waves in the future. Maybe I'm one of the lucky ones who can accomplish something powerful that doesn't need to be censored to protect the future.

Maybe pigs have wings.

— ABO —

Why Aboriginal?

(Continued from page 71)

can be compensated for, any handicap overcome. That's the way we are when we are at our best.

We, for instance, have figured out where our publisher's home planet is — in a binary, or double-star, system known as Eta Cass in the constellation Cassiopeia, or 19 Cass. Once we knew that much, we turned to Hal Clement to help us imagine what the Eta Cass system might be like (it's too far to discern by radio telescope). We call it *The Home System* for obvious reasons. Then we decided to turn the tables a bit and have invited science fiction writers to speculate a bit about our crazy alien publisher's home system and what life it might hold. Maybe, if we are stubborn enough, we can make this a two-way conversation. We suggest you read *The Home System* (in ABO #1) to learn a little more about our publisher's physical background and then read John A. Taylor's "The Phoenix Riddle," (also in ABO #1) our first human-

authored story set in *The Home System*. His phoenixes are a delight.

So there you have it. Now you know why we have called this *Aboriginal SF* and you know why we asked Hal (who is a genius at these things) to create *The Home System*. We haven't told everything, of course. More will be revealed in future issues, including a fictionalized account of how we stumbled onto the alien's signal.

Now that you have an idea of what we're about, please relax and enjoy the rest of the issue.

The Editor's Notes which conclude above were written in the summer of 1986. Needless to say the alien publisher is a *fiction*.

An admittedly informal study of the science fiction field had revealed that magazines which had names beginning with the letter "A" had largely survived (*Astounding-Analog*, *Amazing*, (Isaac) *Asimov's*), while those with other leading letters had failed (*Worlds of If*, *Galaxy*, et al.)

This is probably just a coincidence,

and certainly can't be considered a rational reason, or even logical ... but why fight the odds? Besides every time the science fiction magazines were listed in any report, it was usually alphabetically. So an A-word was essential. And if we were to choose an A-word for the title of our magazine, why not one alphabetically ahead of the others? Most of the good A-words were already taken. A search of most references left us with Aardvark, Aboriginal, or Absolute science fiction. Aardvark had two As, which made it tough to beat alphabetically. Unfortunately it had already been used by a fanzine and I couldn't think of a damn thing science-fictional about it. Absolute sounded like Russian vodka.

That left Aboriginal ... and the column above.

Of course there are no aliens on the Earth, or flying saucers, or intelligent beings living out there somewhere in interstellar space — We've made it all up. Or have we? I can tell you one thing. I do not write the alien publisher column. We get it by computer

— ABO —

Covers for Your Walls



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ABO #4



ABO #5



ABO #6

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ABO #7



ABO #8